ONLINE DATING DYNAMICS DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

DINAMICA ÎNTÂLNIRILOR ROMANTICE ONLINE ÎN TIMPURILE COVID-19

The online dating environment and apps are an always-available method for quickly "finding someone" thus perceived by the media and some users as promoting and accentuating a certain hook-up culture (Garcia *et al*., 2012). Relying on this argument alone is not enough to apprehend the social universe of online dating – especially during the pandemic of COVID-19. The aims of this study are to explore the romantic narratives and modified online behaviours that have risen during (and maybe even because of) the physical and social distancing restrictions and the impact these rapidly evolving technologies have on intimate social connections and risk perception. Therefore, some questions inevitably arise: how is the push towards the digital and online world affecting the dating scene? how have users adapted? and how contrasting worldviews about romantic and sexual life are reenacted on dating apps in times of COVID-19? This exploratory study consists of descriptive qualitative research conducted on dating applications (primarily Tinder and Bumble) in Bucharest, Romania, between January and March 2022. The research uses in-depth interviews, informal discussions, first-hand exploratory experience of using dating apps and content analysis. Although respondents have not adopted a completely digital lifestyle (implying a no face-to-face interactions dating strategy), online dating technology is a "prosthesis" in facilitating social interactions and reducing loneliness. The findings depict online dating narratives – how one perceives the practice of online dating and online courtship before and through pandemic; self-presentation on dating apps – how one's identity is

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permanently reconstructed; risk management – how risk awareness is highly gendered and how people navigate the situations created by COVID-19 restrictions and disease contraction; other findings would be a resistance to full online dating migration and that the experiences and uses of the dating apps are gendered.

Keywords: risk management, digital dating, romantic narratives, COVID-19, digital transition.

INTRODUCTION

Although more than two years have passed since the beginning of the pandemic, its repercussions are vividly remembered, from the panic and restrictions to the emotional toll of doom scrolling and isolation. World Health Organization has continuously recommended limiting interactions outside one`s household and avoiding physical gatherings when possible (WHO, 2020). For those seeking new romantic or sexual relationships, these restrictions meant a push to reevaluate and reconstruct the dating world. All of a sudden, the rules and norms around safety and social distancing were competing with the desire to connect. Individuals were heavily encouraged to move the dating scene online, as "dating does not comply with recommendations for social distancing" (Farid, 2020). Social restrictions and fear of infection have trickled down changes in online interactions of all kinds, even more so in those that seek physical and emotional closeness. But what changed in the dating experience during these past two years?

Despite not being a novelty, online dating apps have taken advantage of the situation and as a result, spectacularly grew in popularity – according to Iqbal (2022), Tinder had 7 million subscribers in 2019, 8.2 million in 2020 and 9.6 million in 2021; also, "Tinder users made 3 billion swipes worldwide on Sunday 29 March [2020], the most the app has ever recorded in a single day" (Shaw, 2020). Online dating developers have used the opportunity created by a boom in users to work on user experience and adjacent features.

Individuals are using these apps as tools for various reasons, ranging from socializing to alleviating loneliness, exploring a sexualized self, or searching for a romantic interest. Ontological insecurities of the modern world were heavily accentuated during the pandemic by a collapse of order; which is why this paper lays a focus especially on authors that discuss ideas of modernity and the ecology of intimate relationships – Durkheim (1987), Bauman (2000; 2003), and Illouz (2015; 2019).

The paper's main aim is to explore the romantic narratives and modified online behaviours that arose during (and maybe even because of) the pandemic through qualitative interviews and digital ethnography, as well as the role of technology as a mediator for the dating experience and its perceived risks. The article also explores possible mechanisms and changes in dating behaviour by reviewing studies of online dating during the pandemic. Our findings draw from

research conducted between January and March 2022 in Bucharest, Romania and includes 11 cisgender single middle-class individuals (6 females and 5 males) aged 20 to 36 who have used Tinder or/and Bumble both before and through COVID-19. Moreover, it is a substantial contribution to scientific literature, since there are few studies of online dating behavior that focus on the Romanian experience, let alone focusing on the effects of COVID-19 and the integration of online tools in mediating romantic interactions. Thus, this study represents an exploratory approach that further research can build on. It also represents a good opportunity for researching how contrasting gendered worldviews about romantic and sexual life are reenacted on dating apps in times of COVID-19. There is no denying that there are strong gendered elements embedded in dating apps that are inherently a reflection of how norms have been embodied and appropriated differently by males and females – findings which will also be reflected in our analysis, but this will not be handled as the main scope of the article.

As will be discussed in the next chapters, online dating apps are a certain social ecosystem with specific rules and behaviours that connect very much to offline perceptions and experiences. Which underlines a need for understanding the impact these quickly evolving technologies has on our intimate social connections during the pandemic and to what extent they can mitigate COVID-19 associated risks, especially the medical ones.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Rapid social changes have forced significant alterations to the emotional, normative, and institutional order – a phenomenon Durkheim would conceptualize as *anomy*. Individuals "aspire to everything and are satisfied with nothing", this "morbid desire for the infinite" leaving "a trail of weariness and disillusionment behind them" (Durkheim, 1997). This world of ostensibly infinite ends is also critically tackled by Beck who underlines the individual's needs for affection when "stripped of social institutions" (Beck, 1995), and by Bauman's concept of *liquid modernity*, through which personal connections and group agency fade away to reveal an ever more commodified version of human partnership (Bauman, 2000). This commodification of social relations extends to romantic connections and aspirations, as Bauman (2003) notes, a ritual of consumption, especially in an online space – what he describes as „shopping for partners on the Internet" (Bauman 2003, *apud*. Portolan & McAlister, 2022). And just as online shopping is based on the choice of an item for mainly visual considerations, so too the body in dating apps becomes perceived through its materiality (or in its "visible" ideality) as an object of narcissistic cult or as an element of tactics and social ritual (Baudrillard, 2008).

Ilouz (2019) continues the comment on the era of consumerist relations to describe a change in the ecology of intimacy through a vast number of experiences of rejection, hurt, disappointment – the process of "unloving" – recycled through the vast economic and cultural machine of psychotherapy in all its forms. These realities are also reflected in online dating applications, "products of neoliberal Western society" (*ibid*., 2019), where one can purchase a better starting point and possibly one's success. A standard dating app functions by presenting one user with a line of profiles of other users, "matches", giving users the choice of swiping right (intention to connect), or left (no intention to connect). If both users swipe right when viewing their other's profile, a match occurs and the two are connected. Tinder and Bumble, among other online dating platforms, have evolved to sell paid subscriptions that offer the possibility to see the positive swipes one has received before swiping oneself, to offer those users a more noticeable profile and other tools that could increase their chance of matching. As a response to the "dating market", the individual in search of partners is simultaneously a consumer and the commodity that is up for consumption (Duguay, Dietzel and Myles, 2022; Gibson, 2021). These applications, through their design and built-in user experience (*e.g*., swiping), reinforce this status of the user. The app's usage of algorithms to pair profiles on the basis of a quantified perception of compatibility institutionalizes the commodification of relationships and accentuates its evolution in the age of neoliberalism *(*Williams, 2017). Online dating apps, especially Tinder and Bumble, rely on "binary visual evaluation – choice or non-choice, swiping right or left (…) and enable the quick «unfriending» as a technical feature of a software" (Illouz, 2019, p. 139). Moreover, popular culture has defined these apps as a perpetuator and possible main cause for hook-up culture, especially in the younger demographic – this is to describe "brief uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other (Garcia *et al*., 2012, p.161). Love in the digital age, as Illouz comments on, incorporates "rational and strategic interests, merging the economic and emotional dispositions of actors into one single cultural matrix" (Illouz, 2015, p. 10). At the same time, online dating apps reproduce gendered patterns of relationships and gender inequalities, such as expectations about initiating contact, body stereotypes, differential exposure to verbal aggression and danger etc. (Fullick, 2013).

Currently the world is facing a period of intense digitalization accelerated by the pandemic, which means individuals are forced to rely even more on these different technologies in order to satisfy some of their social needs. But this increased dependence on technology in all important aspects of life due to the emergence of the pandemic also involves several challenges. Research conducted in different cultural contexts point to a decline in sexual acts altogether, be they solo or with a partner – finding that has been directly linked to lockdowns and the

overwhelming negative emotions and uncertainty (Klein, 2021), especially depression symptoms such as stress or loneliness (Balzarini et. al., 2021). The pandemic has also affected already formed relationships, studies reporting reduced libido and quality of life in some demographic groups, e.g., younger women who live with their sexual partner (Schiavi *et al*., 2020). And while some studies found individuals are still intimately active despite restrictions, negative feelings of guilt and anxiety were persistent (Winking, 2021). It is believed that daters are more likely to engage in "risky" behaviors if they perceive the potential benefits to be valuable to their social and romantic lives in the immediate and long term. They are faced with choosing whether the risk of contracting COVID-19 is worth taking a chance in order to diminish those risks associated with a temporary break in dating life: loneliness, isolation, and lack of affection, among others. *COVID compatibility* is actually a decoding of social signifiers about which behaviors are acceptable during the pandemic and could even provide a hint at prospective partners' broader belief and value systems (Williams Miller and Marquez-Velarde, 2021).

Thus, existing literature hints towards multiple scenarios of adaptation to dating in times of COVID and towards a certain negotiation between minimizing risk and subscribing to a narrative of collective safety against satisfying personal/social needs.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This paper depicts an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study on dating applications and user behaviour (primarily on Tinder and Bumble) conducted between January and March 2022 in Bucharest, Romania. The research method focuses on in-depth interviews (with duration of approximately one hour), informal discussions, first-hand exploratory experience of using dating apps and content analysis. As for the secondary research, we have analyzed official COVID-19 measures, the marketing politics of Tinder and Bumble, and articles from other countries that studied online dating during the pandemic.

The study includes 11 cisgender single middle-class individuals (6 females and 5 males, all white, Romanian, heterosexual and living in Bucharest) with ages between 20 and 36 who used Tinder or / and Bumble both before and through COVID-19. All but one respondent are vaccinated. A short description of each respondent is shown in the table below (*Table 1*). The table also presents the intentions and needs our respondents identify from their app usage. It is worth noticing that most if not all respondents aspire to "serious relationships, perceived through heteronormative, monogamous lenses". Serious relationships are hence defined by respondents as being long-term, stable, and faithful.

Table 1

Respondents` profiles

Code	GENDER	AGE	Needs from apps and relationships
M1	M	30	Looking for a serious relationship; he would like to have children with the next potential mate, but he doesn't say no to "fun", just hook-ups.
M2	M	30	Looking for a serious relationship, but regards any experience as useful, even a social one.
F1	F	28	Looking for a serious relationship; her most important need is to receive attention, to have someone by her side.
F2	F	21	Looking for a connection, in terms of interests. Lots of dating (dozens) that only met once. She is interested in growing old with another person. Had one long-term relationship through Tinder.
M3	M	26	Single, looking for a relationship, but not using Tinder solely for this.
M4	M	24	Not currently looking for a serious relationship; rather interested in experiences, but not just one-night stands.
M5	M	20	Looking for long-term relations, does not accept the idea of hook-ups; doesn`t say no to social experiences.
F3	F	24	Looking for a serious relationship, but since the pandemic, she wants to meet new people, get involved in things, discover other places / activities.
F4	F	36	Looking for a serious relationship, she wants children; regards herself as romantic, but has conservative values.
F5	F	23	Uses Tinder because she was curious to see what was there, mainly with the desire to socialize.
F6	F	33	Looking for someone to spend the rest of her life with. Never considered engaging in hookup culture or spending time on the app just for experiences.

The interviews mainly cover dimensions such as, but not limited to, the respondent's romantic profile, the impact of the pandemic on dating habits, the perspective on real-life versus online dating, their online dating history, and their behavior on these applications, how they managed online pandemic dating, perceived risk and the entanglements of uncertainty, credibility, and authenticity.

The results of the interviews were also doubled by the researchers' direct experience. For a better understanding of the phenomenon, we set up accounts on these applications and used them for at least two months, while one of the researchers maintained an active account on Tinder and Bumble since before the

pandemic for personal use. Thus, we went through the processes of building profiles and got first-hand experience of the functionalities of these apps in order to observe how users present themselves. Regarding the ethical implications of this method of research, as we did not ask permission from the users we have been observing, we refrained from interacting with them and didn't use or disclose any of the personal information available in their profiles (names, age, location etc.), although they become publicly accessible data when one agrees to create a profile on these apps.

Some of the interviewees' motives for justifying certain outcomes are made up *ex post facto;* a common fact in the practice of interviews, but some justifications may be distorted by the need of the respondents for social validation and for reducing cognitive dissonance in case of "failure". Thus, the respondents' assertions were analyzed as "rhetoric of motives" (Burke, 1950) which gives meaning and order to seemingly chaotic circumstances (Hopper, 1993). This way the study could highlight how social life is perpetually negotiated.

It is important to mention that this research does not have a general character and cannot be extrapolated to the situation of the whole online dating scene of Romania, respondents being found and contacted through a snow-ball effect sampling. Moreover, one of the limits of this study is the homogeneous sample – there are no discussions on other relevant socio-demographics such as lower income groups, on the queer community, different ethnicities, and rural-urban divides or on individuals with special needs. The authors are aware of the larger spectrum of sexualities and gender identities and therefore view this as a considerable limitation. Also, all the respondents live in Bucharest, where the offline dating scene might be in many aspects different from other cities in Romania.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis covers COVID-19 and pandemic online dating behaviors – how restrictions have brought new challenges to the dating scene and how applications have tried to cope with (and often profit from) these changes. Most respondents reject a complete paradigm shift, in which all interactions would take place exclusively in the online environment, dating applications being used as just another tool in finding the right people and in initiating conversations that would continue further, offline. Thus, the use of these digital environments in facilitating interactions is explained not only by the conditions of distancing and isolation imposed by the pandemic, but also by other factors such as fear of being rejected face to face, the shame of initiating discussions in a physical context, the possibility to display a better image of one's self, virtually unlimited choices always at hand, comfort, boredom, social pressure to always find the best option etc.

The findings will be structured on three main dimensions: online dating narratives – how one perceives the practice of online dating and online courtship before and through pandemic; self-presentation on dating apps – how one's identity is permanently reconstructed; risk management – how risk awareness is highly gendered and how COVID-19 associated risks shaped the interactions.

1. ONLINE DATING NARRATIVES. BETWIXT AND BETWEEN SHORT-TERM INTERACTIONS AND LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

The online dating environment and apps are perceived by the media and some users as promoting and accentuating a certain hook-up ethos and culture. But some research show that they could also be used for "Love, Casual Sex, Ease of Communication, Self-Worth Validation, Thrill of Excitement, and Trendiness" (Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2017). Individuals interviewed for this research were generally looking for intimacy and deep connection, but the apps' architecture, fast swiping, ghosting (abruptly ending contact with someone without offering any warnings or explanations), commodified love, fake personas, has made it increasingly difficult to find them.

Generally, interviewees of both genders observed that most matches do not lead to conversations and most conversations do not turn into real dates. The logic of dating apps usage in our target is similar with what Portolan and McAlister (2022) observed in their study, individuals becoming trapped in the "loop" of fast swiping, matching, having multiple simultaneous short conversations with some of the matches, experiencing negative feelings, taking a break from the app and then repeating the process. These are the regular steps most individuals take in the online dating world, even before the pandemic – confirmed by all our respondents. Most interactions through these apps are viewed as superficial, almost robotic – they follow a pattern.

„Participants' perceptions of mobile dating, gender roles, and scripts were strongly shaped by broader social norms" (Sobieraj and Humphreys, 2021). Men usually engage first (and are expected to do so), applying "strategies" like starting with a joke or breaking the ice with something more out of the box, to stand out from the "competition". This reflects the idea that "to perform gender identity and gender struggles is to perform the institutional and cultural core dilemmas and ambivalence of modernity, dilemmas that are organized around the key cultural and institutional motives of authenticity, autonomy, equality, freedom, commitment, and self-realization" (Illouz, 2015, p. 9). This is also indicative of certain traditional gender roles still being present in Romanian culture, as males are the ones to initiate an interaction and females tend to

assume a more passive role. In the present research, this effect seems to decrease with age, with women in their 30's being bolder to take the first step, as explained by some of our respondents.

Other research papers show a gendered experience of the app as well, where women seek the app for social and self-validating reasons, while men prefer using it for purely sexual reasons, traveling, or a materializable relationship (Ranzini and Lutz, 2017). As for our interviewees, we have seen little evidence to support that claim – as seen in *Table 1*, both male and female respondents stressed the element of a serious relationship or a strong emotional connection, even when saying they are only looking for experiences. Hook-ups were generally frowned upon by both genders, as no one declared this is what they were searching for. They view hook-ups as being superficial or even detrimental to one's emotional health and needs, as M1 observed: *hook-up is not a good idea, it has no value, it doesn't add anything for either one of us, it is just a night of sex. It is a detour from what is important.* However, how individuals perceive their potential partners is a different story, as emphasized by F2: *most* [guys] *you find on the app want hook-ups, they don't consider something serious. It gave me the sense that men are superficial, they are looking to have sex and that's it. They're not interested in you as a person,* [they want] *only to catch something.* Yet, the men who are less successful in the online dating arena find this alleged hook-up culture and attitude projected onto them to be unfair and unrepresentative for them, their social circle, or, in general, the dating scene in Romania. *I'm still searching for that hook-up culture, where is it?*, wonders M1. He also noted that there are large gender differences between how male and female users interact with these apps: *women's and men's experiences are radically different. A chick swipes and 9 out of 10 she gets a match, although she is average* [looking]. *Women have where to choose from, any woman has an average of 200 matches.*

For the interviewed males closer to the age of 30, the experience with online dating was and remains unsatisfying. Online chatting and the prospect of online dating is not very appealing for them. They see the purpose of dating apps just as a means to find people they know are interested in them, in order to move the conversation and relation in real life, as fast as possible and find someone suitable for a long-term relationship. Talking for a couple of weeks was perceived by most males we interviewed as already too much time spent. They do not want to waste time just on socializing if they cannot build a real relationship. Most said they are not interested in hook-ups, but in a real long-term monogamous relationship. Still, as this goal was never achieved by most of them, although some used these apps since 2015, they were content also with hook-ups, if nothing more could happen. Same was true for females, who were not searching for hook-ups, but often accidentally ended up in such a situation. After the first couple of dates or sexual contact, the relationship ended.

In this context it seems as if this online environment encourages fleeting relationships, or better called – interactions. Yet, there are cases when individuals succeed in their goal of creating long-term relationships, as was the case of F2 who managed to transform a Tinder date into a real boyfriend, while all interviewees said they personally knew couples that met through dating apps. This possibility keeps the users hopeful and still engaged – information known to the developers of this kind of technology, who are thus aware of users' needs and push the narrative that they are not there just for casual relations, but for creating the environment to find real love. They are using corporate messages, publishing romantic success stories, and even examples of users who met on these apps and got married (Duguay, Dietzel and Myles, 2022).

2. COVID-19 – A NEED FOR A DEEPER CONNECTION

Some governments recommended "communicating with our partner(s) virtually (known as cybersex or sexting)" as a „great alternative for when our partner(s) live in a different household and are following the social distancing recommendation" (Santa Clara County Public Health Department, 2021). Because of the restrictions on movement and meeting in person, some state policies (like in Canada, United States or United Kingdom) and dating apps presented this period as an opportunity to find love through the promotion of virtual dating (Duguay, Dietzel and Myles, 2022). According to a recent Tinder survey, those who used video chatting or went on a virtual date see it as a low-pressure way to get to know someone. In fact, "40 % of Gen Z Tinder members say they will continue to go on digital dates, even as date spots re-open" (Wiederhold, 2021). In our research, we found limited evidence of a preference for online dating behavior (Zoom meetings, FaceTime etc.). Although online video calls with friends took place before and in the beginning of the pandemic, the practice of virtual dating rarely happened for our respondents, even in the first total lockdown months-ul and even less of it persisted after this period. Some have tried having a date through video calls, but since most declared they strive towards face-to-face interaction, this option is thought of as a backup plan, maybe even a last resort. As Gibson (2021) observed, this is indicative of how adaptable individuals are in the pursuit of maintaining their emotional and sexual needs, using digital tools, when other avenues are not available.

The pandemic had a role in accentuating certain needs for human connection, desire and lust, as F1 mentioned: *during the pandemic I was constantly online to find someone. I had weeks where I would be on the app everyday […] wanted to see what's new, meet someone*. Some expressed their accentuated need to touch and be touched themselves during this period, even if that meant just a pat on the arm. The pandemic played a crucial role in

amplifying the perception of these small gestures as somewhat unwelcomed while at the same time forcing the physical distance that created a stronger yearning for them in many individuals.

We observed a common thread among respondents; because more users joined dating apps, as other chances of meeting people offline were slim (curfew, limited program for venues, no parties or clubs open), matching on apps was more frequent, and there was a certain availability to talk and connect deeper. This is in line with what other studies have noted (Vinopal, 2020; Gibson, 2021). Still, some individuals used the app primarily as an entertainment source, while in lockdown: *oftentimes I would use the app during the pandemic, in the evenings when laying in bed, just for fun. To entertain myself, have who to talk to* (F4).

The flexibility of technology-mediated social interactions responded to this increasing need to be in touch and connect with others. On the one hand, the social and geographical barriers are challenged – online apps having the capacity to bring people from different paths of life together that would probably have not interacted otherwise. At the beginning of the pandemic, Tinder offered paid features for free for its users – expanding the partner search area. One respondent (M4) stated that because of boredom and the need to talk to someone else, he matched with a girl from Nepal with whom he talked for days, *to hear what problems others have. I didn't even know where Nepal was on the map before,* and also with women from Iceland. He did not want a relationship with any of them but fueled the discussions out of weariness. He is not the only one who had interactions on dating apps only for the sake of interacting. Another respondent expressed the same feelings: *I talked to women just to talk, even though I wasn't necessarily interested. There was one who was in the same high school as me and I talked to find out some current gossip about teachers, stuff like that* (M5). This finding aligns with Goldstein and Flicker (2020) insight that the inability to find and meet potential partners in real life has transformed online flirting into a game-like activity, where the player can just have some fun without expecting any long-term or serious commitment to result from these flirtatious acts.

On the other hand, this flexibility of dating is accentuated by time and context conventions which are challenged, as the interaction often is not simultaneous. The two people who matched may be in very different contexts at the time of the discussion, and the time of day they interact (very specific to each individual) greatly influences the outcome – which does not happen in everyday life, when the interaction takes place live with both persons present in the same context. For example, one respondent says that he realizes that when he tries to flirt through texting with a girl, *maybe she's on the toilet and all my romance falls at the wrong time. And the reverse is also true, when you're at home and you've had a match, maybe you don't feel like talking or answering* (M3).

The COVID-19 pandemic also represented a good excuse to subvert current dating norms, not to kiss or hug someone on the first date if that person was not

willing to. Social norms became more fluid in these times. Nonetheless, F4 stresses that the pandemic and its restrictions (*e.g.*, bars and shops closing at 10 p.m.) allowed individuals to be more direct with their intentions and move faster into trying to have physical contact: *And they were saying, why meet so early and we both leave at 6, when we can come from the beginning at mine and have some wine. […] you can see their neediness; they were so upset! I wouldn't cry them a river. If you ask me, men have become lazy. And they started taking advantage of the app and the restrictions – using it as bait to call a girl straight to their place* – a sentiment that was also echoed by other female respondents.

3. SELF-CONSTRUCTION IN ONLINE WORLD

How one constructs their self in the online sexual field decides the chances of being chosen. In a sexual field, as Illouz notices (2015), individuals evaluate others and feel they are in a competition for winning their desired partner(s). Consequently, there is a certain need to perform, to be their best selves in order to "win" while also displaying their pick-up mastery or sexual attractiveness. Self-management is, therefore, essential – you will not be given a second chance if you are "swiped left" and our interviewees stressed that first impressions are vital.

Oftentimes, Tinder dwellers "binge swipe" (especially male respondents), swiping many profiles in just a few seconds, basing their decision on a visual and instinctual cue: *Over 60 % of the swipes I make, regardless of whether they`re left or right, are done unconsciously, I don't even think there are 2 seconds in which I analyze the profile* (M3); *I swipe super-fast, I don't stay to watch much… After all, it's an application where you look at pictures. I'm not reading complicated descriptions* (M4). Matching experience can therefore be seen as commodified, users need to sell themselves and construct a visually appealing pitch, as they compete with many other individuals.

This perceived competitive environment can foster anxiety or low self-esteem for some individuals, if they are not getting enough matches or having any meaningful conversations, as M2 observed: *I quit Tinder many times because I had no success. I started to feel discouraged and stopped trying even in real life to search for women; I was thinking something is wrong with me*. Others receive an ego boost when having more matches, as one feels desired, even if those "matches" die out or do not transform into conversations.

As mentioned before, starting March 2020, dating apps users have continuously increased: *now in the pandemic I think there is a niche for every taste, there is a person for everyone* (M3). This increase means more available options – which might be translated into a stronger need to create a more desirable profile to stand out. Apps have introduced or expanded during the pandemic on multiple features to address the customization and appeal of a personal profile *e.g.*, photos,

short descriptions, interests, zodiac signs, music (favorite song and top Spotify artists). Still, this tendency was observed even before the pandemic, as noted in the theoretical description of the evolution of dating apps.

The interviewees depicted several ways in which they used these features to construct their profile in dating apps. They tend to use various symbols through pictures and selfies in order to signal their social status, values, cultural affinities, lifestyle, hobbies, free time activities or even sexual preferences. In turn, when browsing, they also use their personal interpretation of these indicators to judge others and place them in an appealing or unappealing "cultural box". For example, M1 mentioned that he chooses some pictures in which he smokes, as he is an avid smoker, M2 picked a more artsy picture of himself to signal coolness. According to most male respondents, profiles cannot just be unlikeable, but downright unappealing: *There are certain cringe postures, like holding your hand on your hips, or a picture with yourself at the Christmas market, or next to a monument, this all mean that the girl is boring. Or from a different social bubble. I can tell this through the habits she shows in pictures* (M1).

Usually, male respondents were less invested in building their profile. They chose very few photos and wrote a short description: *the only thing I put there is that I graduaded from the Polytechnic and the age and the name and that's it and I have two photos* (M3); most male respondents considered that, even if they do get a match, being in a high competition with other males, their self-presentation does not guarantee a discussion with that match; what can matter more is how one starts the conversation. Some female users even mentioned this in their description, as noticed through our direct experience with dating apps: male users have to impress from the start of the conversation, maybe with a witty joke or pick-up line, in order to receive a response and continue the chat. This falls in line with the fact that men and women "create profiles that adhere to heterosexist gender norms" (Humphreys, 2006).

Throughout our journey on these online dating apps, together with the insights from interviews, we have noticed that female respondents tend to be more attentive and spend more time choosing pictures that send the "right" message, adding more information like zodiac signs, hobbies, linking their Instagram profile and updating their profile more often. F3 declared that she even spent time deciding in which order her photographs should be displayed. Male respondents tend to assume female users present their best selves, while putting more thought into their presentation: *I believe that women show their best pictures and if she is not looking really good in them, it means something* (M1). This reflects the fact that "the female role as the object of desire reinforces an emphasis on physical appearance among women. Men are more concerned about a potential partner's appearance than are women" (Davis, 1990, apud. Rose and Frieze, 1993). This gendered approach in building a profile represents a strong reflection of the embodiment of gendered expectations on the dating scene.

There is a certain tension, as other research has shown, between the pressure to construct a desirable self and the need to present oneself in an authentic manner, especially when searching for significant relationships (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006 apud. Greene, Derlega and Mathews, 2006). Similar to how one presents themselves in real life, individuals strive towards presenting an idealized version of themselves online, in order to maximize their chances of success. So much so, some declared, that if they choose to show their real selves, they might not get matches. *If I chose the photos I like of myself, I would match less. I like more silly or strange photos* (M2). However, being aware of this perceived exaggeration of some traits or even faking them for the sake of matching, authenticity is highly valued and sought after. A few mentioned trying to present themselves as honest as they can (e.g., without editing or adding filters) – even updating their profile every time their physical appearance changes, to maintain that sense of authenticity.

Trust in strangers is also a big topic and a research theme for dating app users, since there is a lingering fear of being catfished. In the online space, one can build a false persona, so there is always the risk of being misled. Some dating apps (Tinder and Bumble, respectively) responded with built-in features meant to discourage fake profiles, such as the *verified profile* option (one must take a photo and send it to the app to prove that they are the same person as their profile). Still, users sense a certain climate of uncertainty and perceived fakeness that transcends into the offline world: *I think Tinder is having a negative impact in my life; you start to lose trust also in people in real life, people that surround you. You notice that people are not how they seem, not just online. Even if you talk a lot with them, in reality they are very different* (F2). The possibility of catfishing is also a reason why individuals tend to ask their matches details about their other social media accounts (Instagram or Facebook), when they want to move towards the next step of virtual courtship. Although not a guarantee of authenticity, there is more information about a person on display, maybe even mutual friends, to consolidate trust and see if they have compatible values and lifestyle.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT AND RISK NEGOTIATING

Interacting and meeting with strangers can pose certain risks (Williams, Miller and Marquez-Velarde, 2021) and other studies have shown that this topic is one of interest for users (Noland, 2021). Regarding risk management, we found that female respondents are more aware of a potential risk. Our male respondents, on the other hand, understand risk rather as “wasting time” with dates that do not materialize and/or as contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Women, in turn, need more time to feel safe as to proceed with meeting in person. They usually apply several tactics like double-checking the person on other social media profiles or looking up their LinkedIn account, searching for common friends, spending

more time chatting, choosing a known place for their date, telling friends they are going on a date and sending information about the date (*e.g.*, her live location). This finding is supported by multiple studies, suggesting that women are more wary of agreeing to meet with strangers met online and are, in general, more skeptical of the safety of the internet (Steeves, 2014; Goldstein and Flicker, 2020).

As mentioned before, moving the conversation on other social media platforms is a common step used by both males and females, in order to verify the authenticity of that potential mate and learn more about them – to see if it is a good match with one's lifestyle and values. Thus, some tend to use this strategy to minimize "wasting time" and the risk of being ghosted.

Prolonged online chatting after matching on dating apps helps women feel more secure before going out and consolidates trust. Yet this also rings true for some male users, who declared they wouldn't go out with someone without at least checking them out on video call or talking a little bit on other social media platforms: *Catfishing is prevented because based on the sharp focus of the pictures I can guess if the person is a catfish or not. Regarding safety, I move the discussion on Instagram where we can talk and exchange live pictures to see who you talk to*. (M5). One of the males was also actively avoiding saying yes to a date if that person seemed drunk, in order to not be accused of rape.

Some of the male interviewees noticed that the pandemic also made women more aware of risks and consequently more anxious: *I feel like women on Tinder are more vulnerable these days, more anxious and fragile. They became more suspicious; you can feel a certain lack of trust they have* (M2).

As for navigating the context created by COVID restrictions and disease contraction, even though official recommendations suggested limiting one`s interactions outside the household only to trusted individuals, very few respondents reported fears of getting infected with COVID-19. Still, when the vaccine became available, some expressed concerns about dating someone who is not vaccinated – but more in terms of personal values than in terms of health issues. Yet, for many of our respondents, not being vaccinated did not stop them from giving a potential partner a chance (especially the males we interviewed were more flexible on this issue). Those that stressed that they only date vaccinated people expressed concerns related to civic and moral responsibilities. In turn, during our digital ethnography, through non-participatory observation, we have noticed some users whose self-descriptions included statements such as: *I only date vaccinated guys* and also users for whom the vaccination status was not important.

Some dating apps (Bumble) reacted in order to satisfy the need for certainty and the vaccination status of potential matches, by introducing a check option for vaccinated people. Still, there was no proof asked for the user who claimed to be vaccinated, so it was easy to "fool" as some interviewees observed – it served more as a signal that can make oneself more desired by others and indicate one's values and moral stance. The apps themselves have been noticed to take risk into

consideration, both Tinder and Bumble developing resources and guidelines on their apps, ranging from how to stay safe when on a date or related to COVID-19 to advise on how to tackle mental fatigue caused by the pandemic or by rejection and ghosting. Bumble asked users to update their preferences that will be shown on their profile regarding face-to-face dating, if one wants to only meet online or also in real life, in what context (uncrowded or more crowded places), having a mask or being comfortable without one.

Overall, the conversations about COVID-19 vaccine, safety and general health were not very popular with our respondents. Female users were more often the ones thinking about the vaccination status of their "match", while the male users rarely initiated a discussion about these topics. This comes in opposition with other studies that have found that COVID-19 forced open communication about health on Tinder (Noland, 2021), regardless of gender.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

In the first three months of the pandemic in Romania, where there was a total curfew and one could get out of their home just for the "essential" needs and activities, dating or meeting with others was almost impossible. This created a surge in online dating via the use of technologies such as dating apps. The usage of dating apps and the general romantic perception in the pandemic are heavily influenced by the negative emotions and ontological uncertainty of such times. In the current context, there is a certain change in users' behaviour on these apps, as some reactivated their accounts after many months, while others created their account for the first time. Some users became "heavy" scrollers during this period, engaging with the app more than they used to before. All our respondents noticed there was a certain hunger for human connection, interaction, even if it only meant chatting. The usual reasons why one uses these apps have changed, individuals were also looking for chatting, socializing, experimenting with online dating through video calls, or just wasting time to kill boredom, as there was not any other offline socializing option. Tinder also used this period to offer unlimited matching, which gave users the option to match with people from around the globe (as usually one can match only in his region or country).

Pandemic restrictions have shaped the ways in which people go out and start new relationships as well as the architecture of choice. Sexual capital being used to "signal and build social worth" (Illouz, 2015, p. 243), leads us to question what happens when restriction on social interaction and curfews on going outside limits one's agency to exhibit this capital? How is it materialized in the online arena? This study aimed to analyze the impact of the pandemic on relationships mediated by online dating applications and "how real-life social dynamics permeate online spaces" (Baym, 2015).

The methodology was based on qualitative exploratory research – we have interviewed 11 cisgender Romanian individuals based in Bucharest who have used dating apps, mainly Tinder and Bumble, both before and during COVID-19. We have also had first-hand experience of using dating apps.

We found a certain trend of resisting the digitalization of the dating life, users rejecting the idea of using online dating as a long-term practice and being focused on transforming the online interaction into a real face-to-face one. Although open to digital methods of courtship and meeting people, our respondents suggest that they used these rather as tools to satisfy those needs that sometime cannot be satisfied through traditional means. Despite the need of relying more on digital means in order to interact in times of the pandemic, we have observed a rejection of technology from the part of some respondents. Still, individuals see some positive aspects of using these apps, as they offer them the opportunity to find and interact, even if shortly, with a more diverse group of individuals – one can escape their "social bubble".

As for dating apps in general, as Illouz (2015, 2019) and others point out, we have noticed a very tight connection between the neoliberal culture and the commodification of relations. Dating apps profit off the fantasy created by neoliberal culture, where the „grinding" mentality has justified a romanticization of hardship to reach the desired outcome, somehow excusing past negative experiences and feeding a hope of finding "the one". As detailed in the results section, most of our respondents have had negative experiences which they pushed through, have had a period of fatigue where they had gone silent on the app, followed by a comeback. Moreover, individuals (especially female users) continue using the app although perceiving it as risky, while taking some steps to minimize risks.

This paper represents a starting point for researching the online dating landscape in Romania, as it seeks to answer broad questions about the perception of the online dating environment, practices of courtship in the digital realm, and about the changes brought on by the pandemic. Subsequent studies will need to consider in depth these issues and to include a larger range of respondents for a more comprehensive picture.

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