

“It’s not you, it’s Tinder.” Gamification, consumption, daily management and performance in dating apps

Joaquín Walter Linne  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4297-3914>

CONICET-Universidad de Buenos Aires/Universidad Nacional de Lanús, Argentina,
joaquinlinne@gmail.com

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Fátima Maris
Hernández

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Abstract: This article addresses the uses that young people from middle sectors of Buenos Aires deploy in dating applications. At the methodological level, an exploratory investigation was carried out, which consisted of the thematic analysis of a thousand profiles and 20 structured interviews with young users of Tinder, Happn and OkCupid. Among the results, 3 emerging trends stand out. In the first place, the “gamification”, which refers to the playful and competitive experience, similar to that of the videogame, which implies the online sex search, in the sense of unraveling strategies and displaying skills to obtain a higher score (likes, matches). Second, the “surface consumption”, which refers to a way of relating to profiles as objects of consumption, which implies not only voyeurism but a constant selection of candidates. Finally, the “daily management of networks and applications” that implies a demanding performance on one’s identity in order to excel in the digital ecosystem.

Key words: TIC, love, sexaffectivity, youth, Tinder.

Resumen: Este artículo aborda los usos que jóvenes de sectores medios de Buenos Aires despliegan en aplicaciones de citas, “levantar” o ligue. A nivel metodológico, se realizó una investigación exploratoria, que consistió en el análisis temático de mil perfiles y 20 entrevistas estructuradas a jóvenes usuarios de Tinder, Happn y OkCupid. Entre los resultados, se destacan tres tendencias emergentes. En primer lugar, la “gamificación”, que alude a la experiencia lúdica y competitiva, similar a la del videojuego, la cual implica la búsqueda sexoafectiva *online* en el sentido de desentrañar estrategias y desplegar habilidades para obtener mayor puntaje (“me gusta”, *matches*). En segundo lugar, el “consumo de superficie”, que refiere a un modo de relacionarse con los perfiles como objetos de consumo, lo cual implica no solo el voyeurismo sino una constante selección de candidatos. Por último, la “gestión cotidiana de redes y aplicaciones”, que implica una *performance* exigente sobre la identidad propia en pos de sobresalir en el ecosistema digital.

Palabras clave: TIC, amor, sexoafectividad, jóvenes, Tinder.

Introduction

While Amazon is the world's largest online supermarket and YouTube competes with Netflix to be the largest streaming platform, Tinder leads the dating app market. While the literal translation would be "dating apps", here we choose to translate dating apps as "aplicaciones de levante"¹ [flirting apps]. These apps, such as Tinder, Happn and OkCupid, have as their main (but not exclusive) function the search for sex-affective contacts. However, there are other similar apps that users² try out, combine and alternate between them. All of them are easy and intuitive to use: just create a profile from Facebook or your mobile phone number, specify your age and the age range you are looking for (from 18 years onwards).

What distinguishes each of these apps? In the case of Tinder, created in 2012, it is the most popular with more than 50 million active users and available in 24 languages. Its specificity lies in its profile swipe interface: to the right to indicate "like" and to the left to continue searching. The app can be linked to Instagram and Spotify accounts, and the maximum desired search distance can be specified (from 1 to 161 kilometres); its geolocator indicates how many kilometres away the contacts are. Its premium version costs between \$7 and \$20 and allows one to see who has liked one's profile before swiping and choosing (Ong, 2017).

Its main competitor, Happn, launched in 2014, has the particularity of generating matches (matches of "likes" between profiles), based on locations where users have crossed paths. Most commonly, they cross paths on the street or on public transport.

The app indicates at which street intersections were crossed and how many times. At the beginning of 2016 it had 10 million active users (Roof, 2016). Its premium version, as with its competitors, gives greater visibility to the user, allows giving unlimited likes and seeing the "likes" that remain invisible in the free version unless it has been matchetted. This version has a monthly cost that varies according to the type of subscription or prepayment made: monthly (20 dollars), semi-annual (10 dollars per month) and annual (6 dollars per month).

1 "Levante" is an Argentine synonym for "flirting". A common expression in Argentina is that someone "tiene mucho levante", meaning that he or she has a lot of "conquests"; that is, a significant capacity for sex-affective seduction.

2 While we certainly support the struggles for equal rights and practices that feminism demands, we maintain the universal masculine for reasons of synthesis and legibility, without ignoring the implications of inclusive language that respects diversity.

OkCupid, created in 2004 as a website, has the specificity of using users’ answers to an extensive series of pre-determined questions in order to find matches that match the preferences set in the answers. Some of the questions it asks are: What kind of relationship are you looking for? Do you want to have children? Do you smoke? Do you have a pet? How do you define yourself politically? In this way, OkCupid builds an algorithm, visually similar to Netflix, that calculates the percentage of affinity between profiles. Based on the information from the answers, it also recommends profiles with a (supposedly) high affinity percentage.

Badoo has an operation that combines dating app and social network features; for example, it allows you to chat with close contacts who are online. The new Bumble is characterized by the fact that only women can initiate chats. In all the applications there is a premium version which can be accessed with a monthly subscription and is constantly promoted. By paying you get more visibility in searches, you can send greetings to profiles with which you have not chatted, you can see the likes received and view profiles without limit.

All these networks are used by men, women, trans and non-binary people of legal age. Although heterosexuals are in the majority, in all of them it is possible to search for men, women or both, regardless of the declared gender. In addition to Grindr being the main app for gays and bisexuals, on Tinder, Happn and OkCupid there are recurrent profiles of bisexuals and gays. Finally, Grindr is characterized by the fact that anyone can chat and send images to another person, without the need for previous matches.

Some of the questions that drove this research were the following: What are the mediations between the languages of an informational capitalism, with its characteristics of entrepreneurship, competition, liberalism and meritocracy, and the ways of organizing affectivity and desire? How are the forms of subjectification experienced in the age of algorithms linked to sex-affective practices? Are “flirting apps” the new video games for adults? How does mobile digital culture impact new configurations of love?

Methodology

In this exploratory research, the objective was to investigate the self-presentations made by young people from the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA), as well as their searches, representations and experiences regarding sex-affectivity. For this, two of the initial questions were: What

strategies do users use to create their profiles in these apps, and what kind of profiles are they looking for and which ones are not?

In order to meet the objective and answer the questions asked, a sample of 1,000 profiles of users of these applications was constructed. All of them are between 20 and 40 years old, live in the AMBA and define themselves as heterosexual (860), bisexual (138) or asexual (2). During the field research, undertaken throughout 2018 and 2019, 20 structured interviews were conducted, through the snowball method, in copresential and virtual mode, via app chat or via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. As for exploratory observations, an ad hoc profile was created on Tinder, Happn and OkCupid with which we dedicated ourselves to studying the profiles and searching for interested parties to participate as interviewees.

A thematic analysis of the qualitative information collected was carried out, which consisted of classifying the images and texts of the sample profiles into recurrent and habitual categories. Some of the main ones were: travel, vacations and expressions of cosmopolitanism; formal studies and cultural capital; corporeality and erotic capital; socio-political ideologies and micro-militancy; habits, cultural consumption, hobbies and sports; queer and non-monogamous expressions. For ethical reasons, we clarify that the profile was part of an academic research. This information was not provided in the presentation of the profile, but in the occasional chats. For the same reasons, no names or personal data are mentioned, and we chose not to include images of the profiles.

State of the art

Those who were born and socialized with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) deploy novel ways of communicating, entertaining, informing themselves and bonding sex-affectively (Urresti *et al.*, 2015). In addition, they are in a moment of vital and social moratorium, especially if they belong to middle-income sectors (Margulis and Urresti, 1996). Regarding the sex-affective transformations that have occurred during the last decades, Illouz (2016) warns about the growing demand for personal autonomy linked to a greater acceptance of sexuality, greater control over reproduction and legislative advances around the women's collective and the LGBT community. In addition, more and more young people are prioritizing their careers and autonomy over the traditional mandate to start a family:

One cannot understand the contemporary idea of “falling in love” and “loving surrender” without understanding the historical importance of individuation and secularization. But considering the importance of freedom of choice is that the contemporary love discourse is constructed: at the beginning of the 21st century, the love ideal is the product of additions and subtractions of all kinds, having as its hard core that “original freedom” in the choice of the other. It is true that the choice depends on a series of factors that have a direct link with the narcissistic constitution of our identity [...] Choosing an “other” to deposit affection and surrender will always be an intimate and ultimate way of exercising a right (De Cristóforis, 2019).

This “right” to choose sexual partners has been expanded and empowered by the relevance of both feminism and mobile technologies. In turn, the Internet has modified the social configuration of love and its protocols, as well as the strategies deployed to establish relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2012). Until a few decades ago, most couples were formed in everyday co-residential settings such as school, university, club, neighborhood, work, family and peer group networks. In recent years, these spaces have coexisted with the rise of sex-affective dating apps and social networking sites.

Castells (2009) proposes the coexistence of three modes of communication in the 21st century. First, interpersonal, the traditional way of relating face to face. Secondly, mass communication, which refers to the broadcasting type, such as television (one-to-many, with little or no interaction), typical of the 20th century. Finally, mass self-communication, which refers to the interaction enabled by social networking platforms from Internet 2.0 and broadband, through which millions of people communicate with each other through nodes of tens, hundreds or thousands of users among whom they disseminate their messages.

Van Dijck (2016) states that a central feature of youth cultures is connectivity as a primary form of sociality. He also notes that connectivity is structured around icons such as “likes”, which translate into algorithms a large amount of information about tastes, preferences and ideologies. This implies the continuous aestheticization of the self in social networks.

In a Bourdieusian line, we have already differentiated three types of profiles in dating apps, according to the most prominent capital in their presentation. The first focuses on economic capital, emphasizing distinguished assets, in particular tourism capital. The second highlights cultural capital: educational qualifications, languages and legitimate knowledge. The first focuses on economic capital, emphasizing distinguished assets, in particular tourism capital. The second highlights cultural capital: educational qualifications, languages and legitimate knowledge. The third revolves around erotic

capital, focused on deploying visual and textual resources that construct an attractive corporeality, through the presentation of physical attributes, poses and seductive practices (Linne and Fernandez, 2019). By “erotic capital,” Hakim (2012) alludes to a combination of beauty, physical attractiveness, and aesthetics that makes some people attractive to the majority.

Regarding the critical discourses against these technologies, Turkle (2011) argues that they increase loneliness and diminish people’s emotional life. Bauman (2013) warns that they exacerbate narcissism and make it difficult to generate lasting partnerships and family projects. However, he recognizes that they provide various tools to meet people with some degree of affinity, although without deepening the same relationship. In turn, Illouz (2019) argues that emotional capitalism incorporates romantic discourse into its productive capacity. At the same time, the sex-affective market is no longer structured on intuition and romantic mystery, characteristics associated with the imaginary of the 20th century, but on trust in the algorithms that filter the profiles. In this sense, social platforms and dating networks such as Tinder, Happn and OkCupid are the ones that design part of the language that articulates sex-affective exchanges.

Results

Surface consumption

Younger generations tend to live in a digital ecosystem where they combine multiple tasks and consumption. Through instant messaging, they communicate on a daily continuum with family, friends and strangers; via social networking sites, they keep informed of the activities of their extended circle of peers, sometimes stalk ex-partners or former school or university classmates, and keep in touch with distant colleagues and friends.

As Bilinkis (2019) points out, people check their phones on average 120 times per day, sometimes without realizing it. If we discount sleep and personal grooming time, this averages out to one phone check every six minutes. Of these, most are reduced to WhatsApp and social networks. In the cases of those seeking sex-affective contacts, they include a dating network.

The anxiety generated by being without any screen is linked to its hypnotic and seductive character. This phenomenon, characterized by the compulsion to be continuously connected, is called FOMO: fear of missing out (Bilinkis, 2019). Missing out from what? Particularly in the younger

generations, who carry their desire to be early adopters (technologically advanced users), fear of being left out of contemporary sociability, visibility and “popularity” allowed by social networks, socio-technological trends and fashionable cultural consumption.

The success of dating networks is also explained by this fear: no one knows if they are really useful, but no one wants to be left out. In such a context, the use of dating networks and social networks is associated with digital voyeurism: that similar curiosity to glimpse into the privacy of others.

As for personal marketing strategies in the design of the profiles, it is common to show children, pets and tourist sites associated with icons of international culture. There is also the presence of various objects and places linked to desire, affection, enjoyment and social distinction: parties, beaches, terraces, hammocks, sports, cutting-edge technological devices, clothing and accessories from exclusive brands.

This proliferation of fetish objects and places is part of the massification of marketing, a discipline that combines emotions with consumer experiences, by imaginatively attaching feelings, ideas and positive characteristics to objects or people, making them desirable. Indeed, Illouz (2019) warns that emotions are not only personal but also social, given that they are part of the capitalist strategy to expand our culture of consumption to new areas. According to this author, contemporary consumer culture shapes emotions, social exchanges and specific modes of sociability.

I love milanesas and alfajores, especially white Jorgelín (female, 25); beer, 420³, pizza, series, video games and barbecues (male, 27); I need someone who knows how to make an espresso Martini (female, 33); I’m looking for someone to go to museums and travel (female, 35); I don’t cook but I love to eat, especially Arabic food, Mexican food and pasta (female, 30); beer, soccer, crossfit and Netflix (male, 28); I like wine, bolas de fraile with dulce de leche and animals (female, 36).

Regarding the interaction between encounters, expectations and frustrations, the digital image tends to acquire greater relevance than the face-to-face one. When the mismatch between digital and face-to-face image is too dissonant, users tend to feel cheated: the differences, “lies” or “adjustments” between the online profile and the person range from marital status, age and corporeality (weight, height, physical stigmas) to occupation and place of residence. In this sense, face-to-face meetings are frustrating in many cases, either because of different expectations, or because of the feeling that there will always be someone better.

3 Code that refers, in the cannabis culture, to the consumption of marijuana.

As Palumbo (2019b) points out, some users hide physical stigmas in their profiles, which generate tensions when meeting face-to-face with others. This strategy is due to the fact that most tend to choose the most “perfect” profiles, discarding those that show flaws. Therefore, for many it is a matter of survival to “lie” or rather emphasize the positive and seductive in order to get likes and matches, which stimulates self-esteem, motivates to continue using the application and allows interacting with others.

In the sample, we detected that it is common practice to “left on read” and ghosting, which refers to ceasing to communicate without explanation with someone with whom one has established some kind of relationship. In most of them there is an imaginary plenty of fish⁴ that there will always be more like-minded candidates to come. In the male profiles, there is a greater predominance of casual relationships (“I am looking for people with a good vibe”, “women to have a good time”, “I don’t want anything serious”). These modulations of heteronormative roles represent what is legitimate to manifest according to the social conditions that apply to both women and men.

In this regard, one trend is to deploy fast food type love bonds: that do not require too much effort, commitment or investment, but are effective and pleasurable.

My priority is sexual, but I’m not limitado to that. Everyone is looking for sex, but women think that men just want to use them for a while and discard them. If there is no kiss on the first date I feel like a failure. The last one when I proposed kissing she said “so vulgar”. They are more interested in a relationship, in many cases they are looking for a partner, they don’t usually just want to fuck. Even if I am very interested, I have all the patience in the world (male, 38).

The interviewees agree that paying for a premium account promotes greater visibility, the possibility of giving unlimited likes and the visibility of likes received: “Since I pay, I have more matches and visibility. It’s difficult, but to make it work you have to pay... unless you are super attractive, which is not my case” (male, 39). Beyond those who have paid accounts, the most “popular” profiles are those that generate stimulating physical sensations, that connect with erotic fantasies, travel, status or linked to sharing satisfying moments. Those who accumulate more “positive credits” in the form of likes, matches and chats are the ones who are able to transmit

⁴ In addition to a popular saying that summarizes the global youth imaginary around the sex-affective market, Plenty of Fish is a dating application launched in 2003 and available in nine languages. It is popular mainly in Canada, where it was born, but also in the United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil and the United States.

greater confidence and desirability, by projecting a range of sex-affective fantasies in a clearer way:

The most effective way is to generate morbidity, whether it is through photos, text, chat or encounters. It may be paradoxical but the ones that show a lot of body don’t usually get a lot of attention, at least in my experience. Besides, they don’t interest me much. But there are very interesting people, it’s like life itself. Of course I give importance to the body, but I’m also attracted to nice pictures (male, 38).

There are also frequent warnings to those who seek relationships as mere consumption experiences, even among those who declare themselves to be in an open couple:

I do not seek to be anyone’s object and that no one be my object. I am in an open relationship, deconstructing romantic love. Responsibly affectionate (male, 28); in an open couple, I am not discard material for that reason. I love life and its thousand shades, challenges and constant movement. Questioner of every breath. Let’s talk about what happens to us (female, 32).

It is frequently stated that they are not interested in casual relationships without “affective responsibility”⁵. This can be seen as a reaction to the trend of surface consumption, based on collecting likes, matches and brief but intense experiences. Ultimately, the proliferation of criticism of those who only seek sexual relationships points to a growing population eager to engage in relationships with a greater degree of commitment and affective involvement.

Gamification

Gamification refers to the process of introducing ludic aspects similar to those of a video game into traditionally more solemn phenomena, such as formal education. In line with Molins (2017), who warns of a growing gamification process around sexaffectivity, we wonder if the levy networks stimulate playful-competitive processes that accentuate the generation of strategies through continuous self-management.

These practices suggest a certain “gamification” of youthful desire, as a large part of their sex-affective searches and romantic-amorous expectations are deposited in the lifting applications. In this way, they not only “infotertain” themselves with video games, relax and get excited with playlists,

5 Affective responsibility is understood as being attentive and empathetic to others. In particular, it refers to not being violent or extremely selfish, which ranges from not insulting or disqualifying the other person to not lying in significant aspects and not ghosting. In short, trying to avoid hurting the other person whenever possible.

but also stimulate their sex-affective imagination and their self-esteem, sublimate their romantic ethos and their sexual drives.

As Haywood (2018) points out, the gamification of desire and flirting become tools for males to generate emotional distance in sex-affective relationships. In this sense, the competitiveness regarding who has the most and best matches contributes to the superficiality of numerous links crossed by these technologies. Particularly among men, the dialogue around dating applications tends to quantify interactions, according to a consumer market logic and gamer⁶ strategy, where the winner is the one who gets the most points.

The paradox of these technologies is that they facilitate the search for contacts, but at the same time raise the demands, which makes sociability difficult. Historically, the weighting of variables such as weight, ethnicity, age, social sector, area of residence and educational level were significant in choosing a partner (Illouz, 2016). However, these applications collaborate in rationalizing the search more by weighting the calculation: height, weight, profession, skin color, neighborhood, age and educational level have a central place in the architecture of the interface than spontaneity and the somewhat indiscernible component of the so-called “chemistry” and sex-affective attraction.

The rationalization of sex-affectivity, together with the expansion of the technology of choice, somehow diminish the enthusiasm for others. Faced with the consolidation of a love imaginary full of candidates, according to the thousands of supposedly related profiles, most tend to be reluctant to bet on a single person.

I like to meet new people, I'm a Sagittarius so I'm always looking for new adventures. Let's enjoy because life is short and there is a lot to do... if we meet and like each other, time will tell if there is more, I am not pretentious or arrogant, I like things clear and straightforward, this is for fun and I take it as a game (male, 30).

As can be seen in the above excerpt, many users emphasize that this is a game, but that they are open to the relationship becoming serious. Beyond this clarification, which may be strategic, the presentation focuses on enjoying and living in the present.

Being basically visual, the selection of candidates weighs this sense in an extreme way. We can hypothesize that the overvaluation of the visual sense contributes to the low generation of matches. Most of them believe

6 By gamers is meant those who play video games on a daily basis, which involves the deployment of strategies and, on many occasions, watching videos of other players on platforms such as Youtube or Twitch to learn tricks and tactics.

they can find someone according to their own tastes and affinities with the assistance of algorithms, which are a determining factor in the contemporary imaginary. What is not made visible is that competitiveness also plays a central role in this new market. A significant proportion have simultaneous chats and, if possible, several relationships at the same time, which implies a veiled competition and constant comparison between candidates. This is tolerated by the applications’ promise that they will soon come across a definite match, which will give them the assurance that the algorithmic search is over.

I give likes to the girls I like and those who post something special or original. Although giving likes is kind of automatic. It is not an act of responsibility, in general they don’t usually give you likes or they don’t even write to you. I matched with ten girls who didn’t even say “hello” to me, so they don’t make an act of responsibility either (male, 37).

All these practices are entertaining and socioculturally interesting, since they provide a glimpse into the intimacy, ideology, aesthetics, humor, creativity and preferences of different people. That is to say, beyond the frustration due to the difficulty to meet, or to have matches and stories that fulfill expectations, one learns about others who find themselves in similar situations and searches.

In short, the characteristics that contribute to gamification in the matchmaking process are manifold: voyeurism, competitiveness, comparison, weighting of visuals over other senses, data collection, strategy sharing, reward for greater interaction and feedback. These components overlap with everyday self-management in social networking platforms and dating apps.

Daily self-management

Predominant strategies

Those who use dating apps deploy various strategies to maximize their “earnings”: they evaluate which features are best to present themselves with, they hold several chats at the same time, they rehearse different poses, gestures, smiles, profiles, clothing and scenery; they consult tutorials and ask for advice from their peers, and coordinate one-hour “micro-dates” to have several on the same Saturday. From WhatsApp they usually move on to the “interview”, casting or “interrogation” meeting, which may consist of a traditional appointment lasting several hours or a micro-appointment, whose brevity is justified by the fact that they already have another commitment

scheduled. Another aspect that frustrates many users is the cancellation of appointments, that is, the difficulty to generate face-to-face meetings.

When there is some chemistry in the chat, it is quickly passed to WhatsApp. And there the traditional scheme is reiterated: if the man does not advance, does not invite them, does not talk to them, they do not usually talk to you or insist or ask you out. When you cancel a date, one hopes that if she is interested, she will be the one to propose a future meeting. That's why it's rare to be offended by someone you don't know, but it happens (male, 39).

Most often build their identity through performances of online intimacy that they manage and share with their extended peer groups. As we have developed in the previous section, the Internet has increased the laborious component of consumption, bringing it closer to the productive sphere, given that the voyeuristic consumption of small intimate stories is also "prosumo": the production of performances of one's own daily life that are published on social networks such as Instagram, a platform that is often linked to dating applications. This management of themselves as a brand is presented as a requirement in extended youth circles, which require active social media accounts to be part of the contemporary conversation:

I'm not usually here, better talk to me on Instagram (female, 29); I usually forget to answer, let's talk on Insta (female, 32); here I'm quite absent, if you want you can write to me @xxxx (female, 28).

In the case of women, references to yoga, spontaneity, freedom, travel, sports, art and cats or other pets are frequent. Indeed, in both women and men, allusions to pets tend to be in personal images, in the presentation text, or both. Beyond the fact that the widespread love for cats is true, the fact that it constitutes an identifying feature of most of the profiles alludes to the belief that the feline imaginary promotes sensations associated with sensuality.

Spontaneous, sincere and cat lover (37); crazy cute and cat lady (31); medical student with a certain fanaticism towards music and kittens (25); travel, adrenaline, art, dancing, fun, nature and animals (33); I love to travel, good sense of humor, companion, fun and feisty, anti-smoking, ariana, I have a pet rabbit (26); my friends, my family, my dogs and the sun are my religion (32); I like sambayon ice cream, sour candies and dogs (36); I have a rabbit, a cat and a fish as pets: if you don't like animals we won't get along (33).

Illouz (2016) warns that publishing profiles on digital platforms turns the traditionally private self into a public representation or performance.

This contemporary phenomenon of publicity and self-management broadens the possibilities of communication and information, as well as allows to specify sex-affective searches according to personal interest.

Simple, romantic and sweet (32); cool, funny and gentlemanly (37); simple, honest and, according to my friends, very funny and companionable (30); sporty, hardworking, persevering and a reader (28); intelligent, secular, relaxed and adventurous (29).

In this sense, profiles operate as promotional prospects for each user. In fact, the most "successful" are usually those who associate the most positive emotions and sensations: desire, mystery, erotic attractiveness, youth, health, lucidity, sophistication, purchasing power, emotional satisfaction, ontological security, joy, affective maturity and honesty. This connects with the centrality that younger generations give to their wellbeing mediated by screens and apps along with various healthy activities, such as going to the gym, doing physical exercise –as much as possible outdoors and leaving a record on the web, attending talks on nutrition or healthy habits, buying organic food or participating in ecological activities.

Vegetarian, cycling, friendship, animals, yoga and enjoying good mates (female, 27); I like movies, running, dogs and the gym, anti Macri (male, 28); I like traveling, creating, laughing, climbing and yoga, I studied art and my main fields are photography, video, illustration, tattooing (female, 24).

This daily self-management is intertwined with their virtual and face-to-face sociability, with entertainment and continuous training through a multitasking⁷ that combines, sometimes overlapping, the consumption of social networks, info-entertainment, games and streaming, with online tutorials on different subjects.

In the case of men, there is a preponderance of references to sports practices, university studies, artistic hobbies, cultural consumption, soccer clubs, trips and dogs.

I like traveling, animals and the outdoors (34); San Lorenzo, crossfit, good humor and ecology (33); Boca Juniors, gym, 420, I like sports and the outdoors (39); gym fanatic, River and dogs (37); cinema, Netflix, law student and Independiente fan (26); dog lover, lawyer, sincere (male, 35); dogs, 420, musician and in an open relationship (31).

Also in the case of men, references to honesty, childless bachelorhood, university studies, reading, travel and dogs are usually appreciated. The appeals to the canine world, according to different interviewees, are associated with a virile and protective imaginary, but also sensitive, faithful and affectionate.

⁷ Multitasking is defined as the way of combining activities that most people under 40 years of age, that is, those who were raised and socialized in digital environments.

As in the case of women, the widespread reference to dogs is related to the fact that “it is effective” or “it adds points”. There are also women who declare their love for dogs (or other types of pets), as well as men who photograph themselves with their cat, although they do not constitute the majority trend.

We argue that the editing of profiles and posts does not occur in an unbridled or thoughtless manner: they are performances of intimacy that involve instances of individual and, on many occasions, also group reflection. Particularly among the youngest, they often consult each other about their performances in order to build and expose the best possible version of themselves in a network. A tour through the ecosystem of lifting applications shows that the central judgment that until the end of the 20th century used to be exercised by families has been replaced by the digital calculation of algorithms, personal self-management and peer group mediation.

“I don’t know what I want, but I want it now”: virtual micromilitancy and negativity.

Defense or rejection of political-cultural groups and ideologies (Peronism, Kirchnerism, feminism, speciesism, environmentalism), positioning around the legalization of abortion and soft drugs; veganism; vindication of traditional values associated with monogamy, such as family, honesty, romance and fidelity, or queer identities, such as polyamory, bisexuality, transsexuality and asexuality. These are constant references in the profiles surveyed.

Many users build their identity by opposition or affiliation to different movements, currents and institutions. This is used by applications such as OkCupid to match profiles by affinity, based on preconfigured questions. In Tinder this filtering process is performed by many users when starting a chat: “Are you in favor of abortion?” “What do you think about feminism?” “Are you a Macrista or a Kirchnerista?” “What are you looking for here?” “How tall are you?”. On the other hand, the assumption is that having crossed paths several times implies living, studying or working nearby and, therefore, sharing a certain socio-cultural affinity and economic level.

It is common for young people from middle class sectors in Buenos Aires to define themselves by their militancy to a cause: political, socio-cultural, nutritional, reproductive or cannabis. In this way, they take advantage of the presentation spaces on mobile applications, as well as their social network

profiles, sociability via chat and occasional meetings with peers, family members or strangers to deploy these micro-militations:

Libra, cinephile, transfeminist and antimacrista (28); neither submissive nor devout: feminist, free and crazy (24); feminist, speciesist, polyamorous and pro-abortion; if you are right-wing, we will not get along (36); art and Kirchnerism (29); gamer, Scorpio, athlete and anti-K (39); Ni una menos: yes, my friend, it will be law, out Macri (31); Peronist, boisterous and feminist (29).

Faced with the loss of modern referents such as religion and family, people try to orient themselves in the sex-affective market through social status markers, such as university studies, and through affinity indicators, such as hobbies, humor, politics, cultural consumption and astrological signs. Faced with the proliferation of profiles, users generate strategies to maximize affinity when selecting them, and thus increase their chances of achieving satisfactory encounters. This is particularly evident in women, who demand more requirements in terms of political and ideological affinity, as well as cultural consumption, marital status and socioeconomic status.

Peronist, feminist and very nice (26); if you're sexist, homophobic, a chauvinist, a turncoat, with affairs with your ex or you're only interested in having sex, go ahead (34); from Independiente, Sagittarius, lover of outdoor activities, I don't drink alcohol (29); Capricorn lawyer, travel as a way of life (34); I play for my ideals: Peronist; that is, if you are a right-wing liberal, we won't get along (33); almost a doctor, Aquarius, I share everything except food (23); teacher, Taurus, always a smile, 1.68 (35); Aquarius, relaxed and honest (35); talk to me if you want about the socialist revolution, tireless and passionate left-wing militant (22); psychologist and Peronist militant (33); yoga, cats, feminism and Kirchnerism (36); feminist testing cases (28).

As can be read in the previous set, the political definitions of "Peronist", "Kirchnerist", "anti-Macrista", "anti-Peronist", "anti-Kirchnerist" and, to a lesser extent, "socialist", "leftist", "anarchist", "liberal" and "libertarian" are frequent. Similar references are observed in men, who also deploy strategies to save resources and interact with those who have greater affinity.

Kirchnerist, musician and traveler (30); romantic, cool, feminist and Peronist (male); anti-macrist and in favor of the feminist movement (27); I like all artistic manifestations, I am vegan and trying to deconstruct myself and have affective responsibility (34); Bachelor of Arts, single, I like books -that's what I do-, movies, walks and good wine. I don't smoke and I don't like it near me. 1.68. Father of a young son (39).

In many profiles it is not clear if the "micro-militancy" is genuine or if it is part of a strategy. For example, although many users are in favor of the legalization of abortion, the fact that the green scarf appears among their profile pictures is related to the fact that it is used by thousands of users

in Buenos Aires. Indeed, in many cases it is a requirement of interaction: “macho or anti-abortionists, abstain” (woman, 30); “if you are abolo or macho, stay away”; (woman, 36); “if you think that female empowerment means putting a picture with a short skirt or half-naked, it is clear that we are not going to understand each other” (woman, 33) (see Image 1)⁸.

Historically, people have searched for matches with people from the same social sector or higher. In this sense, it is observed that users of dating apps look for people with a similar class habitus (Bourdieu, 1987); that is, with a similar matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions, which implies an equivalent status and a similar view of the social, political and cultural world.

This also denotes an exaltation of homophily: unlike a nightclub, where the selection of attractive people is based more on physical appearance, dancing, looks, conversation and humor, here people tend to select profiles, beyond the central aspect of physical attractiveness, by similarity in beliefs, education and socioeconomic status. The latter is denoted in the ability to show personal photos on international trips and in clothing, in the display of various markers of socioeconomic status (cars, motorcycles, terraces, beaches), in educational credentials and in the form of writing and oral expression.

In this sense, Palumbo (2019a) observes that numerous university-educated users discard candidates based on spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and not pronouncing the “s” at the end of some words. Hundreds of users share these strategies via WhatsApp groups, websites, Facebook pages and YouTube videos.

If you write with spelling mistakes, walk away (female, 33); If you eat your s’s when you write or speak, it’s not going to work (female, 35); I’m not looking for Prince Charming, but at least he has all his teeth (female, 37); I’m looking for a college student like me, with up-to-date studies (male, 36).

At the same time, it is common for profiles to be defined by lack of definition, particularly in those under 35 years of age: “I don’t know what to put here” (30), “I don’t know how to define myself” (25), “I’ll pass” (28), “mmm” (23), “...” (29), “I change too much to define myself”, (29), “I change too much to define myself, ask me” (32), “I am indecisive even to define myself” (27), “I don’t even feel like describing myself but this app doesn’t let me go on without doing it hahaha” (30). Likewise, it is usual to find identity constructions by denial, by what they are not or do not want to be.

I don’t believe in zodiac signs, nor in feminism (female, 33); anti-macrist and anti-macho (female, 31); anti-feminist and anti-vegan. Nothing like a good piece of meat

8 This image can be found in the Annex at the end of this article (Editor’s note).

(male, 35); I don't want to have children nor am I interested in anyone who does (female, 37); I'm not looking for Prince Charming but at least that he's 1.75 (32).

This denial also functions as a quest for originality and a reaction to so much homologation of "positive" characteristics. The strategy of negation also warns more clearly about what is neither sought nor desired. Indefinition performatively constructs mystery or "hysteria", in the sense of ambiguity of desire, but it also reveals a certain honesty, making explicit that one does not know clearly what one is or what one is looking for.

I'm not a runner, I'm not messy, I don't watch Tinelli or Mirtha, I don't care about superheroes and stuff like that, I'm not apathetic (38); I'm not a feminist or a Macrista or a Peronist. So many to be with, so few to be with (28); I'm bored with soccer and common places, I don't like conversations that don't go anywhere, nor chocolate, pizza or meat. I don't listen to idiots(33).

Ultimately, in this context of social gamification of sex-affectivity mediated by the dating apps, many couples, tempted to experiment with the new modalities available, separate in the hope of finding someone better, or of being freer and fuller in tune with their desire. Others do not dare or decide to separate and try different modalities: using these applications without telling their partner, generating an open couple agreement, or looking for threesomes or other swingers.

Paradoxical effects

Among the various paradoxical effects generated by these technologies, one that stands out is the destabilization of thousands of couples who have conflicts due to the "breakdown of trust" involved in checking each other's screens or digital activity. This intrusion or monitoring of the other's digital activity sometimes comes up against certain evidence (empirical, potential or merely virtual) of "infidelity", either through chats with a seductive, romantic or sexual tone, or with references to face-to-face encounters. Jealousy is also frequent because of continued activity in a "dating network" or because of the publications and contacts with whom one interacts via social networks.

At the same time, the daily presence of feminist slogans also generates tensions in many couples, where hundreds of thousands of women question their partner's verbal or physical violence, or the symbolic violence they consider an unequal division of domestic work, care tasks, leisure time or sex-affective practices.

These couple tensions account for this moment of transition from the traditional couple paradigm, with a closed and private intimacy, to more

autonomous individualities that put in tension the monogamous and long-term couple model, questioning the values and practices of past generations linked to exclusivity, demand, commitment, dependence, cohabitation and family project. Faced with this, thousands of couples and individuals try different responses to have experiences outside the monogamous and sometimes heteronormative framework: to separate if they do not feel sexually satisfied and experiment through these applications, to use these contact technologies clandestinely within their monogamous couple, to try with an open partner or with a queer⁹ identity.

These technologies also promote other “side effects”: from addiction to the adrenaline and self-esteem stimulation generated by matches, impotence in the absence of satisfactory matches and encounters, as well as anxiety and frustration at the time invested that does not translate into meaningful chats, encounters and bonds.

Paradoxical effects and, therefore, periods of fascination and rejection proliferate around dating apps in hundreds of thousands of users. As one young woman (29) points out in her profile submission, “I need to meet someone who can help me delete this app”. Many users suggest that they find it difficult to sustain the multitasking required by these apps over time, given that it is a demanding job that is added to the rest of their daily tasks (work, academic, domestic and caregiving).

These apps don't frustrate me, I don't ask too much of them either. But they do burn me out sometimes because they generate a lot of work. I have had periods of one appointment per day, or even two appointments per day. At a certain point you just can't get your head around it (woman, 40).

Sometimes you get sick of the fact that it is very difficult to generate a good meeting. Too many complicated people. Too many options and we all have a hard time deciding, choosing who is the best option. It takes a lot of work that sometimes is not compensated (male, 39).

I have a love-hate relationship with these apps. I open them, use them for a while, don't hook up with anyone, or when I do hook up it's not reciprocated, and vice versa. I get tired, close them for a while, fantasize that I'm going to meet the love of my life in a library, at Starbucks, in college or in a course. It doesn't happen. I download the app again and so on. An infinite circle (female, 36).

One interviewee (39) mentions:

I attract attention with the title of Bachelor in Humanities, for those who are interested in that, even if it is not true. And I put an image of the green handkerchief to show that an anti-abortionist girl doesn't suit me. I was helped a lot by a girl who chatted with

9 Queer refers to any non-heteronormative, non-heterosexual sexogenic practice or identity.

me and told me that my description looked like a resume, she explained that I had to improve the text and the images. Most women have a knack for always looking pretty in photos, much more than we do. And if you don't have personal photos of yourself, they don't talk to you. I used to have only one blurry photo of me. I also realized that it doesn't work to be too fancy or to look smart. On the other side, they are looking for simplicity. Many propose to switch quickly to WhatsApp, which is more dynamic. The last girl I met proposed me to WhatsApp, she is a few years younger than me, at first I didn't like her, but we went for an ice cream and I thought she was really cool... although I didn't like her and we didn't see each other again. The one I'm seeing, we went to the movies and got along well, although we met four times and didn't just kiss. My expectation is that there will be mutual interest in having sex, which doesn't always happen when you meet. I'm looking to hook up with a girl, although I know it's difficult.

In this, as in other testimonies, a certain paradox between two tendencies that coexist in tension can be seen. On the one hand, an exacerbated individualism and surface consumption, manifested both in the frantic index fingers that never cease to indicate hearts/likes or red X's for profile rejection, as well as in the thousands of matches that die without reaching the chat and in the proliferation of cold ghosting. On the other hand, there is a certain spirit of camaraderie among peers who share digital etiquette codes and help each other by giving each other tips on editing profiles, or triggers for chatting or initiating dates. This solidarity between users can be observed among friends, lovers, ex-partners or strangers. At the same time, those who give advice construct themselves as bearers of knowledge, legitimizing themselves.

The fieldwork also reveals another paradox. On the one hand, the dynamism of the contemporary sex-affective search that allows us to meet potential partners every week. At the same time, the solitary and sometimes distressing task involved in processing the different expectations, diverse interests and unequal levels of attention and desire that most of the sex-affective relationships mediated by these technologies entail.

I give likes to the girls I like and those who post something special or original. Although giving likes is kind of automatic. It is not an act of responsibility, in general they don't usually give you likes or they don't even write to you. I matched with ten girls who didn't even say hello to me, so they don't make an act of responsibility either. When there is some chemistry in the chat, it is quickly passed to WhatsApp. And there the traditional scheme is reiterated: if the man does not advance, does not invite them, does not talk to them, they do not usually talk to you or insist or ask you out. When you cancel a date, one hopes that if she is interested, she will be the one to propose a future meeting. That's why it's rare to be offended by someone you don't know, but it happens (male, 39).

Part of this “proliferation of unhappiness” is related to the tension in which the two main youth sex-affective imaginaries coexist: on the one hand, the romantic one, associated with gallantry, initiative and a certain male paternalism; on the other, the feminist and queer one, linked to equal rights between genders, female autonomy and polygamy. This tension is evident in different issues: in the search for purely sexual relationships that some embitter or the search for couple relationships that others desire; the defense of monogamy or “free love”; the “touch and go” versus affective responsibility.

In this context, it goes without saying that most of them are socializing with several people at the same time. Among the most common initial agreements made by users when starting a relationship is to deactivate these applications, which implies adhering to the monogamy contract that still governs most sex-affective relationships.

I get tired when I use these apps a lot. Your head explodes. They all call you. You don't remember what you talked to each one, you repeat things, or take for granted things you didn't say. There is always the joke “no, you told that to the other one”. In the environment it is known that many are with several at the same time. It is still a gesture towards the other to stop having these applications when the relationship starts to get serious (male, 37).

The continuous “entrepreneurship of self” generates a certain physical and mental stress or burn out in many young people. Between a game, a hobby, a competition and a job, the search, selection and seduction of candidates for sex-affective relationships never seems to stop. Thus, leisure time is occupied in devising strategies to increase likes, followers and matches.

Last week I just told one of them that I didn't want to see each other anymore after going out four or five times. What used to happen over a longer period of time as a courtship, now happens in three weeks, that's very rare. I had an intuition that it wasn't going to prosper but it warmed me up. That is more for men than for women. For me, due to a number of differences, it could not be a couple. She is lower middle class, I am in a more comfortable position. Although we are in different situations, they were interesting encounters. She got a little angry but she appreciated the honesty, that we had a coffee, and we didn't do the classic ghosting (male, 40).

Regarding differences by gender, what was revealed in the field coincides with what Palumbo (2019a) observes at the local level, following Illouz (2016): women tend to seek relationships with a higher degree of commitment and affection, while males tend to focus more on the search for sexual experiences. Researchers attribute these characteristics to upbringing and patriarchal socialization, as well as to the so-called “biological clock”. Of course, there are many women who also focus their search on sexual

experiences. This tends to destabilize men, who are not used to women first making their sexual desire or simply their desire to meet each other explicit.

It’s hard to know what they want many times. Whether they want you to be more classic, more “macho”, or more sensitive male. I love it when a girl approaches me, but it makes me nervous. I don’t say that as a macho guy, I’m not used to it (male, 28).

Sometimes I say well, that’s it, I’ll say something, let’s have sex, but I see that it makes them uncomfortable and they get hysterical, they start to spin around. It seems very masculine to them if a woman proposes sex (female, 27).

This alternation of roles is observed with a greater preponderance of men under 30 years of age, who are more imbued with the feminist imaginary and the consequent reflection on gender equality. In any case, men of different ages report difficulty in decoding female gender expectations.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper examines the youth experiences that have arisen as a result of the use of dating apps. These new spaces of search and sociability represent a social transformation with respect to the traditional spaces from which most couples emerged: school, university, family contacts, work or friendships. At the same time, technology has a conservative trait, since it tends to exacerbate superficial aspects of traditional sex-affective selection: the valuation of youth, thinness, height and distinction through consumption and cultural practices that often imply a certain socioeconomic status.

In this context of production of desire, the digital is no longer only a mediator but also a condition of existence. In fact, face-to-face spaces such as nightclubs, bars and parks are more used by contacts generated on social networks or dating apps than as places of initial seduction between strangers. Erotic capital is valued in these virtual sites as much as in face-to-face spaces, but it is promoted in extended circles of peers through the Internet.

The strategic rationalization involved in the design and selection of profiles implies an intellectualization of the sex-affective search and socialization process. Thus, the association between sociotechnological management of the person and sex-affective management becomes closer. In this context, separating from each other calls for the incorporation of expressive resources and strategies to reinsert oneself in the sex-affective market: production and editing of photos and texts, selection of profiles, questions to ask in chats and on dates, wardrobe and different seduction techniques.

As Tenenbaum (2019) points out, the casting or “discarding” of profiles is usually done in a few seconds based on scarce information: name, age, neighborhood and some personal images. In other cases, a sentence or a paragraph of presentation is added and read by some users. In any case, this decision, which in face-to-face environments implies greater corporeality, different senses and humanity, is reduced here to a cognitive process to determine whether or not I like that profile, according to a series of images and words. In this sense, the sex-affective search in the digital era, with all its mediations of profiles, interfaces and protocols, tends to be as laborious as it is playful. In any case, it is a task similar to that of the gamer who deploys strategies and strives for greater recognition within the game. In a way, expert users of these applications are like gamers who are beginning to become professionals.

In dating apps, there is a predominance of surface consumption. Most of them are dedicated to voyeuristic use, to test the sex-affective market, waiting for a match that will encourage them to move out of their digital comfort zone, with occasional encounters. While the majority of men say they are only interested in casual relationships, the majority of women emphasize their interest in relationships with some degree of commitment. Faced with the proliferation of men considered superficial, they tend to take two courses of action: not to waste time and resources on encounters for which they are not sufficiently motivated, or to have as their main objective the enjoyment of sexual experiences.

This greater expression of desire for partner relationships or “human relationships” in women is often combined with greater selectivity when choosing profiles. Unlike most men, who are more focused on erotic capital, women tend to weigh other aspects as well, such as the presentation text, the quality of the photos, marital status, healthy habits, as well as affinity and what the user is looking for in the app. Most seek to establish a relationship with someone who is interesting and not “jealous, sexist and controlling,” who does not threaten their autonomy and personal projects, considered part of the empowerment achieved through the feminist struggles of their ancestors, their peers and themselves.

Linked to the massification of these technologies and contemporary sex affectivity, two emerging trends can be observed. On the one hand, the expansion of the use of dating apps, streaming, social networks and messaging, as well as the time dedicated to “self-management”; on the other hand, an increase in “micro-militancy”, a social trend associated with the defense of causes that combine political and socio-cultural dimensions.

Micro-militancy proliferates alongside the values of honesty, commitment and politics, as well as the empowerment of women and gender minorities that feminist movements claim.

While these applications have transformed the sex-affective market by democratizing search and sociability channels, they have also consolidated their inequality, given that their algorithms "elevate" the most charismatic profiles, those with the highest capital and the highest exchange value in the form of likes, interactions and subscriptions. Among other issues, the dating apps highlight the tension that exists on the Internet between performance and self-design, which requires constant daily management between the different performances to maintain dynamic profiles and sincerity, one of the most sought-after values on these platforms. That is, on the one hand, those who perform seductive performances are rewarded with more likes.

At the same time, users claim the "traditional" value of honesty as a lost or scarce value, given the frequent distortion between photos and co-presenters, or regarding their ages, jobs, personality traits and significant existential issues. This call for honesty is linked to the maximization of time and the search for "like-minded" "candidates", companions or potential lovers: people tend to feel comfortable and attracted to others with a similar habitus, that is, with a similar worldview and with someone who meets their gender expectations: in the case of many women, a "virile" but "sensitive" masculinity; in the case of men, they tend to prefer a youthful and seductive femininity, more focused on erotic capital.

There is also a marked vindication of life outside of screens: trips, outdoor activities, sports, walks and expressions of desire for a return to slow and "traditional" time, to a sex-affective rhythm before the frenetic pace of dating apps. Here again, the paradox of contemporary technologies is evident: on the one hand, access to thousands of diverse profiles is valued, which enables more opportunities to meet someone like-minded; on the other hand, the proliferation of profiles, the veiled competition that underlies the gamification of applications along with voyeuristic surface consumption often generate more frustration than gratification.

For this reason, many users use these technologies intermittently: intensively for a few months, until they run out of energy and decide to deactivate them or forget them for a few months, in order to replenish the physical-cognitive energy required by the daily management of these applications, which is added to the multitasking of work, family, academic and urban mobility commitments that most of them have to fulfill.

Although singles represent the majority, there is an increase in the number of people who clarify (or not) in their profile that they are in a couple (monogamous, in an open or semi-open relationship) or that they declare themselves to be “polyamorous”. At the same time, many define themselves as bisexual, asexual, demisexual, sapiosexual or as couples seeking threesomes or other couples. This emerging proliferation of queer profiles points to different tensions around the monogamous heteronormative model that hegemonized most social relations until the end of the 20th century.

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Annex

Image 1

Green headscarf, symbol of the campaign for the legalization of abortion in Argentina (2018-2019) and present in numerous profiles of young women in Buenos Aires



Joaquín Walter Linne. PhD in Social Sciences and Adjunct Researcher at CONICET, based at the Gino Germani Institute of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Main lines of research: inclusion of technology in middle school classrooms, different forms of cyberbullying and sexaffectivity mediated by information and communication technologies. Recent publications. Linne, Joaquín (2019), “En búsqueda del match perfecto. Perfiles, experiencias y expectativas socioafectivas de jóvenes en torno a Tinder”, in *Última década*, no. 37, Chile: Universidad de Chile; Linne, Joaquín (2018), “Nomadización, ciudadanía digital y autonomía. Tendencias juveniles a principios del siglo XXI”, in *Chasqui*, no. 137, Ecuador: CIESPAL; Linne, Joaquín (2018), “Las órbitas de contactos en Facebook. Intimidad, sociabilidad y amistad en adolescentes de sectores populares en Buenos Aires”, in *Comunicación y sociedad*, no. 32, Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara.