

Navigating Algorithmically Constructed Romantic Landscapes

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Abstract

Digital dating platforms, driven by algorithmic infrastructures, significantly shape contemporary romantic experiences. Existing research often oversimplifies online love by overlooking the complex normative frameworks users navigate. This study, based on 21 consumer interviews, uses an institutional theory lens to analyse user agency within three distinct logics in online dating. We examined the power dynamics of these logics using a 4-point consumer empowerment framework. Our findings advance scholarship on the platformization of the relationship industry and consumer agency, illustrating how individuals navigate an algorithmically constructed romantic landscape.

Key words: *Online dating, empowerment, logics*

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1. Introduction

Digital dating services have profoundly reshaped emotional lives, accelerating exchanges and expanding choices, thus transforming contemporary dating (Rosa & Trejo-Mathys, 2013). A few dominant tech players, with their 'coding elites,' control powerful algorithms (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021), continuously refining them for personalization and engagement (Beer, 2017; Fisher & Mehozay, 2019). These practices set industry standards for data collection and algorithmic processing, consolidating their influence and raising ethical questions about power and algorithm use (Pasquale, 2015; Fisher & Mehozay, 2019). Algorithms, guided by logic such as reiteration (Airoidi & Rookka, 2022) and market principles (Pasquale, 2015), now steer many of our decisions.

In examining digital dating, we address the call to understand how algorithms, as forms of social power (Beer, 2017), are perceived and used by users. Given their often-obscure technical nature (Pasquale, 2015), we question how individuals can engage the affordances of platformization (Kozinets et al, 2021). Existing studies (Minina, Masè & Smith, 2022; Ordoñez-Giraldo, Phipps & Ozanne, 2024) explore modern love's logic. Our study extends this by highlighting the multiple coexisting and competing logics within dating platforms and the everyday strategies users employ to navigate them.

To structure our investigation, we employ Institutional Theory, a theoretical lens gaining traction in marketing and consumer research (Ben Slimane et al., 2019; Dolbec et al., 2021; Lounsbury et al., 2021). Our analysis focuses on how users navigate the multiple institutional logics embedded in digital dating services, shaping both online and offline experiences. We highlight emerging tensions between competing logics and show how user agency constitutes a form of institutional work—negotiating and managing contradictions rather than transforming the institution itself (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This interplay unfolds within the rich ecosystem of digital dating platforms, offering a suitable context for examining how institutional logics are mobilized through “material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules” (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 804).

We envision our study's contribution as twofold. First, we extend work on dating industry platformization by accounting for the multiplicity of institutional logics within the field. Second, we contribute to ongoing conversations about consumer agency and empowerment in engaging with dominant market logics. Consumer empowerment is defined as strengthening the ability of users to consume or fulfil their objectives (Kozinets et al, 2021). While existing

research often focuses on collective actors challenging market structures (e.g., Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Chaney & Ben Slimane, 2019, our study shifts attention to the more mundane, situated ways users engage with institutional logics—not to transform the field, but to preserve autonomy. In doing so, we foreground a pragmatic, micro-level form of consumer agency, and in some cases, empowerment, demonstrating how consumers sustain, resist, and reproduce institutional logics by reshaping market interactions through everyday practices rather than organized activism.

2. Context

The digital dating ecosystem, encompassing casual dating, matchmaking, and online dating, is a rapidly expanding industry projected to reach \$8.67 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2023). This "love industry" has garnered significant attention from scholars across various disciplines, including marketing (Minina, Masè & Smith, 2022; Ordonez-Giraldo, Phipps & Ozanne, 2024), sociology (Illouz, 2019) and communication (De Ridder, 2022; Huang, Hancock & Tong, 2022). Researchers are keen to understand how the culture of love transforms when subjected to technology and app-driven monetization.

Interpretations of this shift vary. Some critical perspectives (e.g., Illouz, 2019; Bandinelli & Bandinelli, 2021; Minina, Masè & Smith, 2022) argue that online dating erodes genuine connections, perpetuating relational uncertainty and overwhelming users with endless choices. Others, like Bandinelli (2022), see a transformative shift towards a new post-romantic ethic, where efficiency, safety, and control replace traditional emotional turmoil, reducing love to a procedural interaction. Conversely, more optimistic views (Ordonez-Giraldo, Phipps & Ozanne, 2024) emphasize consumers' ability to form authentic relationships despite social and technological disruptions.

A significant driver of these dynamics is the algorithmic infrastructure of most digital dating platforms. Algorithms are not neutral tools; they actively shape consumer experiences (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022). Their power lies in processing data and predicting user behavior, influencing digital and physical environments by determining what users see and how they interact (Zuboff, 2019). This performative nature means algorithms constantly refine predictions and recommendations based on ongoing user behavior (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022). However, algorithmic power does not negate human agency. Users adapt to, exploit, and even manipulate algorithmic systems, asserting their active role in digital environments. One way

is through "algorithmic literacy"—a practical understanding of how algorithms function, enabling users to modify their behavior to influence outcomes (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Beer, 2017).

Our study builds on this by making visible the multiplicity of institutional logics coexisting within online dating markets and documenting the everyday strategies consumers use to navigate this complexity. Drawing on the institutional logics perspective (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012; Lounsbury et al., 2021), we move beyond structural determinism to explore how users engage with, accommodate, and sometimes push back against competing normative frameworks that shape their dating experiences. By tracing consumers' reflexive engagement with algorithmic infrastructures, we highlight their capacity for negotiation, illuminating how they reconcile platform logics with culturally situated and personally resonant understandings of intimacy.

3. Methodology

In this study, we follow users of online dating apps and their experiences as our primary unit of analysis (Caliandro et al., 2024), drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews to examine the multiple institutional logics that structure online dating and how consumers engage with them in practice. We collected 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews (Arsel 2017) with users of dating apps between 2019-2020. We intentionally avoided analyzing the Covid period to prevent strong bias in our responses due to the social restrictions in 2020 – 2021.

We qualitatively analyzed our data using an abductive approach, iteratively moving between theory and empirical material (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) to refine theoretical insights as they emerged. Following guidelines for abductive data analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022), we used manual coding to identify recurring patterns. In open coding, we examined observations by asking classical rhetorical questions (“who does what, when, where, how, with what consequences?”) to uncover assumptions and latent meanings in consumer online dating experiences. Open coding served as both data reduction (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) and a defamiliarization technique, allowing closer examination of participants’ taken-for-granted assumptions. We noted surprising variation across and within cases, reflecting competing beliefs, expectations, and normative frameworks related to online dating.

In focused coding, we engaged in a more theoretically informed investigation, examining theme relationships and tracing key conceptual dimensions. This revealed how scattered consumer meanings, assumptions, and normative expectations reflect multiple, coexisting, and at times conflicting, institutional logics. Focused coding deepened our understanding of how these logics structure online dating experiences and the strategies consumers use to navigate them.

This abductive process led to a nuanced understanding, allowing us to conceptualize the identified institutional logics and consumer navigation strategies as ideal types (Weber, 1949). These are heuristic constructs, not fixed categories, that exaggerate tendencies to clarify social complexities. Ideal types serve as interpretive anchors, offering a conceptual vocabulary for theorizing ambiguity and making sense of meaning (Scaff, 2014). In practice, users rarely align with a single logic, instead moving fluidly, blending, or rejecting them—an idea developed in the findings. By identifying these ideal types, we develop a “map theory” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022)—a theoretical sketch of a social world’s general contours. Here, institutional logics map how online dating platforms are socially organized and how users orient themselves. We now present our findings, outlining the identified institutional logics and user navigation strategies.

4. Findings

As our analysis shows, online dating is structured by a constellation of institutional logics that shape user expectations and interactions. These logics create patterned possibilities that users must learn to interpret and respond to. We identify three dominant institutional logics at play: algorithmic, consumerist, and romantic, each framing dating through a particular set of norms, expectations, and success criteria. These logics are best understood as interpretive anchors, rather than rigid categories or mutually exclusive realities, as users often move between logics, blend them, or reject them altogether. As we will later show, consumers’ navigation of these logics is not aimed at transforming the institutional field, but at crafting a sense of personal autonomy within its tensions and contradictions. In the meantime, Table 1, on the next page, provides a stylized summary of these logics as a framework for understanding the interpretive work users perform in negotiating online dating.

Table 1. Competing logics in online dating

Platform Empowerment	Dimension	Algorithmic Logic	Consumerist Logic	Romantic Logic	Power Dynamics between logics on a 4-point framework of consumer empowerment
Choice – <i>Increased consumption choice and better decisions through information and education.</i>	<i>Guiding impulse</i>	Algorithmic control	Commodified desire	Relational agency	Consumers have the perception of choice, which is encouraged and ultimately determined by algorithmic logic. Relational agency is an underlying aspiration.
	<i>Perception of the dating field</i>	Endless choice	Marketplace	Space for connection	The algorithmic logic manifests itself through unending choice, thus strengthening the notion of both marketplace and increased space for finding the right person.
Voice – <i>Enabling expression, complaining, word-of-mouth, or other forms of public resistance or reporting</i>	<i>Mode of engagement</i>	Gamified	Transactional	Exploratory	Access, filtering, and speed all accentuate a gamified consumer experience. Transactional logic, due in part to personal content provision, is effective without demeaning the romantic logic.
	<i>Desired Outcome</i>	Ongoing choice, Novelty	Casual sex, Social capital	Emotional depth, Partnership	Conflict between consumerist and romantic logics is unmitigated by ongoing choice and novelty.
	<i>Evaluation cues</i>	Algorithmically curated visibility	Physical appearance	Personality, descriptions, shared interests	Each of the three logics attains similar power through strongly perceived agency in evaluation cues.
Justice – <i>Providing redress, service to vulnerable consumers, safe products, and acceptable quality levels for consumer rights.</i>	<i>Expectations from Self</i>	Following the app's lead	Maximizing options, Exploring preferences	Personal integrity, Authenticity	Negative self-judgement emanating from expecting higher ethical behaviour from others than from oneself can depreciate romantic logic. Consumer logic nevertheless is reinforced through increased options. A 'hands off' algorithmic logic, is a bystander.
	<i>Perception of others</i>	Characters in a game	Objects, products	Potential partners, companions	The platforms are not seen as adequately providing redress for psychological or physical harm. Dehumanization in consumerist logic opposes a romantic notion of matchmaking, both from external perspectives.
	<i>Expectations from Others</i>	Know how to play	Be chill, no pressure	Be real, emotionally available	Mismatched expectations from each logic can result in frustration between not only users but also antagonism between the platform and users.
Consciousness-raising – <i>Increasing consumer awareness of consumption and marketplace behaviours' connection to wider social issues.</i>	<i>Usage behaviour</i>	Frequent check-ins, nudges, inflated expectations	Multi-matching, fast replies, sexualized conversation	Deep chats, fewer matches, app avoidance	The platforms conduct advertising which encourages behaviours that change society's dating practices and values. The three logics act as conductors of these changes.

4.1 Algorithmic logic

As Airoidi & Rokka (2022) argue, algorithmic platforms articulate user behaviour, filtering, ordering and constituting everyday consumer experiences through processes that are opaque, authoritative, non-neutral, and recursive. As interviewee 11 puts it: *‘They are a company trying to make business and their ideal situation would be if everybody stays stuck in the app because then they would generate profit. Their profit is not based on success on exit’*. Or as interviewee 7 stated: *‘a mass manipulation to make cash, and to exploit the vulnerabilities of people’*. Users appear to make choices yet remain trapped in a feedback loop of desire and frustration sustained by dating apps (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2021). As users actively reflect on the app's structure and its impact on their dating, algorithmic logic isn't absolute. Many users express ambivalence, critically recognizing and navigating what the app promotes. Thus, algorithmic logic functions as a negotiable system that users learn to understand and position themselves within.

4.2 Consumerist Logic

Dating, framed by consumerist logic, becomes a marketplace for maximizing personal choice and short-term gratification. A transactional mindset drives frictionless interaction, offering abundant potential partners with no strings attached, fostering independence. Interviewee 6 declared: *‘It’s easier to drop someone because you met this person on these kinds of apps. Like it’s not really real, you know? She’s not really real. He’s not really real. Because in the end, I don’t care. I was just shopping on the app.’* Rather than seeking commitment, participants who follow the consumerist logic articulate a preference for what interviewee 14 repeatedly refers to as an “easy relationship”—one that is emotionally light, non-exclusive, and doesn’t carry future obligations: *‘The best relationship would be this easy relationship... We just see each other not quite often. Because at the same time I would like to be in a real relationship, I think. But I don’t want to meet my girlfriend via this app’*.

4.3 Romantic Logic

Romantic logic, unlike consumerist and algorithmic detachment, prioritizes emotional authenticity and relational meaning. It resists the acceleration and gamification of algorithmic structures, aligning with insights on social synchronization in online dating (Ordonez-Giraldo, Phipps & Ozanne, 2024). For example, for interviewee 18: *‘Everyone there is mostly just looking for sex. But I want something else — something real, sincere. I know these are just apps, but I want to meet someone and feel something’*. Interviewee declared: *‘A date misunderstood my*

search, she thought it was for a one night stand. It was good for an obvious reason (laughs), but not good because it was not what I was looking for. (...) what I expect (...) is to meet a girl that would become my girlfriend, that's all'. In contrast with the consumerist and algorithmic logics, within the romantic logic framework dating becomes a field of cultivating the right conditions for intimacy, rather than a matter of maximizing options.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Adapting the consumer empowerment framework by Kozinets et al (2021), we examine the dynamics between the three identified logics through the lens of four consumer empowerment elements. These findings show that consumers perceive choice, influenced by algorithmic logic and unending options in digital dating, reflect a societal shift towards "liquid" relationships (Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012). This abundance creates moral ambiguities, risking the treatment of people as products. Users feel a duality, constrained yet attempting to leverage market logic, mirroring surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). This highlights the need for greater transparency, accountability in platform design, and improved algorithmic literacy (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022) among users who contribute data daily.

Our research extends consumer studies on institutional market dynamics, highlighting user agency in navigating conflicting institutional logics. We show market actors sustain or disrupt norms, sometimes but not always empowered by dating platforms, through everyday practices, not just activism. Reframing agency as self-preservation and optimization in algorithmically mediated markets, we shift focus from institutional transformation to situated autonomy negotiations. Unlike literature emphasizing collective resistance, we document individualized, pragmatic consumer agency in online dating. Future research could benefit from ethnographic approaches which allow sustained real-time engagement with platform use as well as exploring the platform developers' practices.

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