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Research Article

Online Dating and Contemporary Social Relations: Opportunities, Risks, and the Transformation of Intimacy in the Digital Age

Aaron Ayeta Mulyanyuma[1, *], Justus Twesigye[2], Muwereza Nathan[3], Agaba Halidu[4] Diana Munyao Mutuku[5]

[1]Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
[2]Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
[3]Department of Sociology, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
[4]Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria
[5]Department of Education Arts (Literature), Kirinyanga University, Kerugoya, Kenya

Abstract

This article investigates online dating as an agent of change in modern social relations, addressing its potential, its pitfalls, and what it portends for the evolution of intimacy in the digital era. The paper discusses the ways in which digital technologies have transformed romantic engagement through the formation of new practices such as algorithmic matchmaking, evolving social networks, and easier access to partners that run across geographic and cultural borders. Based on classic theories in sociology and communication, the article explains how online dating affects the construction of identity as well as the pursuit of relationships in networked societies. It also points to major challenges, such as deception, cyber harassment, commodification of intimacy, mental well-being, and algorithmic bias exacerbating existing social inequalities. The research also argues that online dating is situated within wider frameworks of globalization, surveillance capitalism, and gendered power relations. It argues that, On the one hand digital dating platforms enable a broader range of relational possibilities, on the other hand they also give rise to new forms of vulnerabilities and inequalities, which call for a stronger ethical regulation, a better protection of users, and the overall enhancement of digital literacy.

Keywords

Online Dating, Digital Intimacy, Social Media, Relationships, Cyber Sociology, Digital Culture, Algorithmic Matchmaking, Modern Relationships

*Correspondence: Aaron Ayeta Mulyanyuma (aaronmulyanyuma076@gmail.com)

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1. Introduction

Online dating has come to play a central role in this revolution, altering the ways in which people meet, assess and maintain romantic relationships in a world that is increasingly networked [16]. Scholars such as [9] argue that we live in society organized around digital networks that transform social relations, [31] suggests that emotional life is increasingly shaped by market logics and technical systems. Amid such changes, online dating is no longer an obscure and fringe activity but a widely accepted institution of contemporary intimacy, one in which algorithms, images, and data profiles shape desire, choice, and even emotional connection.

Online dating is the use of internet which online dating platforms provide virtual communication services such as email and chat for users to connect with potential matches. Scholars like [16] argue that online dating services bring about a qualitative change in the way people select partners as they go beyond local and social boundaries to form a "choice set" of potential partners, a consideration set significantly larger than those involved in traditional mate selection processes. But this growth is not without consequence. In his "liquid love" theory, [2] asserts that modern day love relationships, including marriage and family, are ever more volatile, reflected by their pliability and hazmat nature. In that way online dating may be construed as an opportunity for connection and as a space of relational dimensionality where the very abundance of choice paradoxically nurtures emotional insecurity.

Intimacy, as an essential element of this research, is defined as the emotional, psychological and relational proximity that is established between individuals as a result of ongoing interaction, trust development and meaning making. Scholars like [21] defines intimacy in modernity as "pure relationships," which are based on intimacy and not social obligation or economic dependency. But in digital worlds, intimacy is increasingly filtered through curated identities, algorithmic visibility, and performative self-presentation. Identity building becomes a strategic form of impression management as theorized by [24], users strategically manage photographs, bios, and communication styles in order to enhance attractiveness in digital attention markets. Scholars like [1] and [50] still warn that mediation can produce "alone together" experiences, with people remaining emotionally isolated even as they're constantly connected.

Online dating services are considered digital ecosystems—mobile apps or websites—that allow users to find romantic or sexual partners via profiles created by the users themselves, matching algorithms and communication tools [16]. They include dating apps like Tinder, Bumble, Hinge and OkCupid, which are all built on data-driven architectures that engineered around engagement, behavioural prediction, and monetized attention economies. [44] contend that online dating is now one of the primary means of romantic partnering for many in the urban world, has overtaken traditional meeting places such as workplaces and social events. But the normalization of this experience has led to robust debates within academia concerning the commodification of interpersonal relations. For example,[31] maintains that digital dating platforms reconfigure emotional life in the terms of consumer choice whereby users' 'shop' for partners according to market-type logics of beauty, social status and (at least in part) 'rational' assessments of perceived compatibility.

While it has grown, online dating is still highly contested within academic research. Critical scholars have argued that algorithmic matchmaking mechanisms mirror existing inequalities (gender, race, class, sexuality). As [40] has demonstrated, digital platforms frequently embed bias in algorithmic infrastructures and replicate discriminatory logics camouflaged as neutrality. Likewise, [37] argue that online dating sociotechnical assemblages promote the radicalization and gendering of desirability, at times offering the greatest favour to dominant cultural beauty ideals. At the same time, advocates assert that online dating expands access to relationships, especially for marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ people, individuals with disabilities, and socially isolated populations who may not have access to traditional dating venues.

This article takes a critical stance on those debates by analyzing online dating as a complex social phenomenon influenced by technological development, transaction costs and changing cultural norms. It posits that online dating is more than a technical tool, but rather a thick social institution which transforms intimacy, identity and power relations in the current society. Based on global data, digital behavioral datasets and interdisciplinary scholarship, this paper advances the debate on algorithmic intimacy as either human enhancement or redefinition of love in the digital era.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of online dating is deeply embedded in symbolic interactionism, a tradition that articulates how people create meaning through ongoing social interactions as well as interpretative activities. Following Mead's (1934/1972) premises, later elaborated by [5], it is human behavior, not the objective world, to which people attribute meaning and act accordingly. In digitally mediated contexts these symbols are not simply physical gestures or face-to-face cues but are also found in curated profiles, filtered photos, emojis, bios, and algorithmically ranked desirability markers. Scholars like [24] contend that dramaturgy is pertinent here as online dating sites are also "stage" where users manage their impression and actively perform identity scripts to impression manage and attract potential mates. Studies such as those by [13] suggest that members negotiate a strategic balance between authenticity and idealization when creating online profiles for dating, as parting of what scholars refer to as "selective self-presentation." However, current challenges state that symbolic interactionism by itself does not offer adequate explanation for the

way in which platform architectures come to shape interaction. The algorithmic curation of profiles, swipe mechanics, and attention economies impose structural limits, predetermining symbolic meaning before interaction takes place. This opens a theoretical gap between micro-level identity performance and macro-level techno-governance, inviting broader explanatory schemes.

Social exchange theory builds upon this analysis by locating online dating in within rational-choice and economic models of social interaction. Derived from [29] and extended by [4], the theory posits that people form relationships with others who they believe will offer them the most benefits, the least costs, and with the fewest alternatives. When it comes to online dating, this logic is supercharged by platform design, which exposes users to a broadened "marketplace of potential partners" that promotes endless assessment and comparison. (2012) suggest that the proliferation of online dating sites is having a fundamental impact on mate choice by creating choice overload that may paradoxically decrease satisfaction and commitment in mates. This justifies findings by [34] from psychology related to decision fatigue in "choice-rich" environments. Intellectuals like [32] go so far as to condemn it as "the emotional commodification of intimacy," wherein love relationships are evermore mediated by consumerist logics. however, for all of its explanatory value, the theory has also been critiqued for translating emotion to economic rationality and, as such, does not adequately capture the emotional, cultural, and algorithmic processes that define digital intimacy. It misses the way in which the automated recommendation systems and machine learning algorithms actively shape the perceived 'value' in choosing a partner, and do not simply cater to preexisting user preferences.

The theory of network society offers a macro-structural perspective that overcomes this constraint by locating online dating in the context of a more general reconfiguration of society under digital capitalism. According to [9], social organization in current times is constructed around space of flows networks of power rather than around space of places networks of domination, where flows is defined as the material expression of an informational logic. Online dating site are the embodiment of such change where the transnational love relations are established via mobile and algorithmic infrastructures. [44] provide quantitative evidence that online dating is the most common route to heterosexual relationships in a number of highly urban societies, a finding that speaks to the intense integration of digital platforms in everyday intimacy formation. But scholars such as [52] and [54] warn us that networked intimacy is not neutral; it is shaped by platform capitalism, in which data extraction, behavioral prediction, and engagement maximization redefine what relational possibilities mean. Therewith a crucial theoretical tension is introduced that would later re-emerge: while network society theory conceptualizes connectivity and transformative structure, it insufficiently articulates the embedded power asymmetries in platform governance and algorithmic control. The unanswered tension between these two paradigms is that none have yet successfully accounted for affect, power and computation as mutually constituent forces in digital intimacies. This research, therefore, fills a research gap by promoting an integrated approach that views online dating as an algorithmically mediated emotional economy, one in which symbolic performance, rational exchange, and networked infrastructures intersect to redefine even the essence of romantic relationships.

3. Evolution of Online Dating

The development of online dating is indicative of a fundamental historical transformation in the technologies of intimacy (the intimate body is now digitally modulated), in the organization of intimacy (now subject to market and administrative relations), and in the material conditions of intimacy now shaped by information economy [18]. Primitive forms of online romantic interaction appeared in the 1990s as simple digital adaptations of personals ads, where users made use of unchanging text-based profiles to indicate interest in potential romantic partners. These early systems, however, [16] argue, were largely repositories of personal preferences that could be searched, rather than interactive and algorithmic that is the hallmark of current platforms. At this point in time online dating was primarily social logic of the offline world spilled over onto the internet rather than social logic of the online world eluting that of the offline world. Global expansion of internet access and the intensification of broadband enabled dating markets to permeate into complex digital economies in which identity, desire, and communication were increasingly mediated by interface design and data infrastructures [26]. Academics like [32] have argued that this transition is emblematic of a key moment in the "privatization /economization of intimacy" in which emotional life is increasingly captured by technological systems characterized by efficiency, visibility, and the need to constantly draw one's attention.

The proliferation of smartphones and mobile apps reshaped the temporal and spatial parameters of dating, creating what media scholars have termed "always-on intimacy." Due to its swipe-based design, (most notably popularized by Tinder), quick evaluation systems compress complex human identities into visual and textual data optimized for rapid assessments. Swipe mechanics also competitively orient partner selection by applying the logic of gamification, that is, the on-lining activity toward partner selection is turned into an interface-based activity influenced through reward loops, dopamine stimulation, and continuous engagement [28]. Geolocation technologies add another layer to this immediacy as they allow users to see potential matches that are nearby, thus turning geographical distance and social barriers into real-time digital proximity [49]. Correspondingly, the integration with social media platforms has enhanced the performative aspect of online dating, as users now create identities that span multiple platforms and combine lifestyle aesthetics, social validation, and romantic attractiveness. Scholars like [52] contend that

this merging is reflective of the larger 'culture of connectivity' in which personal relations are increasingly oriented by platform infrastructures that commodify visibility and social interaction.

The current era of online dating is more geared toward artificial intelligence and machine learning, and predictive analytics, leading matchmaking to become a data-consuming practice of behavioral deduction. Algorithms compute patterns of swiping behavior, messaging volume, geolocation, and interest metrics to calculate compatibility scores and motivated recommendations. "Surveillance capitalism" is a term used by [54] for an emerging system of extracting, analyzing, and monetizing human behavior for predictive value. Emotionally driven dating preferences are no longer simply revealed, but are deduced, engineered and refined via algorithmic machinery in the world of online dating. Algorithmic systems, [22] has argued, are not neutral intermediaries but active agents in defining what is visible, desirable and who receives social opportunity. But a major theoretical paradox opens up: Algorithms promise to deliver efficiency and compatibility, yet they also tend to hide some of the cultural, emotional, and situational aspects of attraction that elude numeric representation. This, therefore, leaves an opening in previous research as to how an affective experience is fundamentally transformed when intimacy is mediated through predictive computation as opposed to interpersonal discovery.

The pandemic was a turning point for the acceptance of online dating as a primary form of relational development. Lockdowns, physical distancing measures and travel restrictions piled pressure on people to use digital communication technologies to meet their emotional needs for connection and companionship. Online dating uptake also "accelerated rapidly" during the pandemic period, further consolidating its position as the leading avenue for relationship formation in digitally connected societies [45]. Virtual dating rituals such as video conversations, digital "date nights" and asynchronous messaging have replaced face-to-face interaction, reshaping what counts as intimacy amid global prevarication about risk. As [50] and other scholars noted, this shift reflects the double aspect of digital intimacy – connection at a distance and in motion on one hand, and disconnection from face-to-face and embodied intimacy on the other hand: while technology mediates contact in times of isolation, it can also intensify emotional ambivalence and a desire for physical presence. Big data studies on patterns of user engagement during the pandemic reveal persistent growth in messaging rates and platform activity, implying that digital intimacy is no longer situational but has attained an everyday relational modality. What makes this transition significant isn't just a matter of volume, but the normalization of the mediated emotional experience, where absence is compensated through screens and proximity is renegotiated through data.

Throughout the historical periods, online dating has evolved from basic information exchanging mechanisms into intricate socio-technical infrastructures that mediate the way in which people desire, trust, and emotionally connect. The scholarly debate is converging more and more on the crux of tension: whether digital mediation fosters human intimacy by involving more choices and increasing ease of access; or whether it reconfigures intimacy as a system of algorithmically-driven preference maximization. My contribution to this debate is to argue that the development of online dating is not simply an aspect of technological progress but a transformation of emotional ontology where love, attraction and relational significance are increasingly encoded within digital architectures that facilitate and delimit what it means to be human.

4. Opportunities Presented by Online Dating

Growth of social networks within online dating is a term that denotes the technology-enabled amplification of interpersonal connectivity beyond geographic and social boundaries. In this respect, social networks are the digitally-enabled webs of interpersonal relationships through which platform infrastructures connect individuals and that are shaped by algorithmic matching, by profile visibility and by communication systems. Scholars like [9] argue that present-day society is increasingly shaped by "networks of flow" not territorially bounded ones and online dating services are a perfect example of this as users can establish connections with people around the world across national, cultural, and linguistics lines. The findings of all three [44] – support the conclusion that in urban societies, online platforms have largely supplanted traditional venues of meeting potential partners such as work and community gathering places. For instance, [32] has pointed out that this brings both freedom and paradox: Individuals have access to relational possibilities that are much more diverse than before, on the other hand they face a bewildering number of choices that may undermine commitment, and leave them more uncertain emotionally. However, by challenging historically inward-looking patterns of mate selection and by extending the emotional geography of intimacy, online dating has played its part in fostering global social cohesion through the creation of relationships transcending borders.

Accessibility enhancement in online dating is the change in the relevant factors including structural, psychological & social barriers that normally constrain participation in romantic relationship formation. Accessibility therefore entails the capacities of people -- notably those geographically, bodily, sexually, or socially anxious marginalized -- to conduct relational business via digital platforms. Scholars like [16] also suggest that online dating reduces "threshold costs" for initiating contact and thus relationship formation becomes more accessible and less dependent on physical proximity and social gatekeeping. Digital dating spaces can offer meaningful relational empowerment for LGBTQ+ communities particularly in contexts where heteronormative societal and legal norms constrain

public manifestations of identity, scholars such as McArthur and McKay (2020) argue. So, too, does [50] note that digital communication may contribute to providing psychologically safer spaces for introverted people to express their emotional needs before they physically co-present with others. But critical analyses warn that access is not always equalizing. Scholars like [40] argue that algorithmic systems can perpetuate racialized and gendered biases, influencing what users see and who becomes visible and desirable in ways that marginalize certain users further. The incongruity of including/excluding structural inequalities continues to be a site of contestation that reveals a lacuna of more intersectional approaches to digital intimacy that could address the power embedded in platform design.

Compatibility and personalization involve employing algorithmic systems and data analytics to forecast relational appropriateness through a convergence of interests, behavioral trends, and inferred psychological profiles. Today, in online dating systems, compatibility is not only negotiated between users during their exchanges, but it is also shaped by machine learning algorithms that sort and suggest potential partners. Algorithms as "cultural intermediaries" that shape what we see, what we prefer and what we end up doing in digital contexts [3]. Scholars like [16] maintain that improvements in relational outcomes are hard to come by, and that what is available can be challenged by evidence-based inquiry into sustained compatibility. Scholars like [32], for instance, has argued that personalization infrastructures reconfigure emotional life into a data-driven procedure of optimization, whereby intimacy is increasingly regulated by predictive logics as opposed to emergent relational experience. Readers might intuit a similar dissonance from users' high subjective reports of satisfaction with matches suggested by algorithm, indicating a certain tension in technological mediation and emotional perceptual alignment. There is a crucial lacuna to be addressed with regard to understanding how algorithmic personalization in turn alters the very phenomenology of attraction—that is, how individuals come to "feel" desire in contexts in which systems have predetermined what is visible, possible, and emotionally salient.

Time and cost efficiency in online dating is a matter of quantitative relational search process being digitally instrumented to reduce time, space, and monetary costs of offline dating. Efficiency here means the capacity of users to assess several potential matches at the same time, to conduct communication asynchronously, and to reduce the costs of time and other opportunities in the case of a failed relational investment. Bauman (2003) has claimed that contemporary social relations and intimacy are increasingly undergoing a process of liquefaction, in which mutability and expediency more and more come to trump durability and commitment. Online dating exacerbates this condition as products of the platforms such as rapid partner switching and continual access to alternative options, reshape temporal expectations of intimacy. Academics such as [16] hold that this increased efficiency could positively impact initial matching processes, but by promoting choice overload could simultaneously result in negative consequences including diminishing relational depth. Big data analyses on patterns of user interaction suggest that users tend to combine multiple matches and conversations, indicating a tendency towards multitasking intimacy in digital culture. However, there is a double-edge emotional ambivalence to this efficiency: it lowers the cost of beginning a relationship, but potentially diminishes the range of experience in a relational path. The more general question within the scholarly literature is whether efficiency aids human connection or converts intimacy into a fast, but emotionally disrupted process.

What these opportunities suggest is that online dating is a profoundly ambivalent social technology that both increases the number of relational possibilities and restructures the terms on which intimacy is felt, assessed, and maintained. The literature is converging toward an understanding that digital dating platforms are not passive mediums, but sociotechnical systems actively shaping emotional life through design and data practice, and algorithmic governance. This ambivalence – between liberation and limitation, inclusion and exclusion, efficiency and distraction, and emotional disruption – continues to characterize ongoing discussions among scholars of digital intimacy.

5. Risks and Challenges of Online Dating

Online dating, by broadening the scope of human relationships, creates intricate risks which are deeply embedded in its technological infrastructure as well as its social and emotional organization. Rather, these are risks that are produced by the very structure and design of digital platforms within a context where anonymity is combined with algorithmic visibility and rapid cycles of interaction to produce user vulnerability. Scholars such as [54] contend that platform environments run on surveillance-driven logics that privilege engagement over safety,[19] argues that digital capitalism inherently converts social relations into data-extractable form of conduct. In this space, risks like deception, harassment, trauma, and commodification are not aberrations but "normalizing" consequences of platform intimacy.

Deception in online dating is the intentional distortion of information between online daters concerning aspects of personal identity, attributes, or intentions, with the aim of portraying as accurate a profile as possible in digitally mediated romantic interactions. A particularly egregious form of deception is "catfishing," which is creating an entirely fake identity to gain an emotional, financial or psychological hold on someone. According to [6] networked publics produce strategic anonymity which make it possible for users to curate or manipulate identity in ways that undermine traditional avenues for verification of trust. Experimental findings by [13] reveal that the most popular forms of misrepresentation in online dating relate to physical appearance, age, and occupation, indicating

a range of deception rather than absolute falsehood.

The anonymity and decreased accountability within digital spaces further exacerbate exposure to emotional and financial harm. [16] suggest that the asynchronous, text-based medium of early-stage online communication restricts availability of many of the non-verbal cues that are used in face-to-face interactions to inform judgments of trustworthiness. This results in what [47] has called the online disinhibition effect, in which people are less impeded by social barriers and consequently behave more deceptively. Investigations of fraud patterns via big data within digital dating platforms show an increasing number of financial scams that are akin to long-distance romantic cons, particularly preying on emotionally isolated individuals. This raises important theoretical questions about the volatility of trust in algorithmically mediated contexts and the lack of robust epistemic verification mechanisms in the formation of digital intimacy.

Cyber harassment in online dating is a type of harassment activity that involves a user being repeatedly subjected to unsolicited, harmful, or threatening contact over the Internet, such as through e-mail, text message, or instant messaging, including aspects of stalking, sexual harassment, hate speech, and emotional coercion. Networked harassment, however, is the focus of women's lives, as they are the primary receivers of various unsolicited explicit content and gendered abuse within digital space [10]. In the same vein, [27] state that technology-facilitated sexual violence is increasingly considered a hallmark of the "new media" age and one, if not the principal, threat to the continuance of the digital utopias that have emerged through an ideal vision of open communication and rapid user interactivity.

Discrimination is further intensified for marginalized groups within online dating. Studies show that racial minorities, LGBTQ + people and those with non-normative body shapes are the targets of exclusionary preferences, fetishization, and verbal insults [8]. Scholars like [40] also argues that algorithmic classificatory systems can rearticulate racial desirability hierarchies by centering dominant Aesthetic standards encoded within training data and user behaviour patterns. These processes demonstrate how online dating sites are not neutral ground, but rather sites in which broader social inequalities are re/mediated and magnified online. The continuing presence of such harms poses pressing questions of platform responsibility, moderation mechanisms, and the ethical governance of algorithm-mediated communicative infrastructure.

The mental health of online dating users has become a growing area of research interest as digital intimate interactions increasingly form the fabric of everyday life. Psychological studies have linked extended use of dating apps to anxiety, depression, changes in self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion. The repetitive process of matching, rejection, and ghosting, [35] argues, generates emotional turmoil that has the potential to erode a sense of relational security within users. Similarly,[46] report that participants who use swipe-based apps most frequently display greater body dissatisfaction and appearance-based anxiety, with the youngest finding this to be particularly true.

The rise of "swipe culture" can be tied to the game-like interface design of many dating apps, in which users use their heads—or more often their eyes—to decide whether they're interested based on a profile photo. This kind of architecture fosters what [16] term "superficial evaluative processing," turning multifaceted relational identities into snap aesthetic judgments. Scholars like [51] contends that these types of environments promote emotional fragmentation, as people are trying to connect and become more relationally distant. Big data research on utilization analytics also reveals patterns of compulsive use, as users continuously come back to platforms after emotional dissatisfaction and represent behavioral loops that are similar to those that appear in studies on digital addiction. The theoretical lacuna in this body of scholarship is how algorithmic design reflects, and more powerfully insofar as it extends, the terms through which emotional regulation, attachment styles and self-perception are understood in digital worlds.

The commodification of intimacy is the conversion of romantic relations into market relations, where people are merchandised, assessed, and traded as digital profiles in competitive relational economies. Contemporary romantic culture, [30] contends, is increasingly shaped by consumerist logics whereby the emotional life is lived under the umbrella of choice, comparison, and optimizations. Online dating exacerbates this trend by turning people into data profiles that can be searched and filtered, and it also infuses intimacy in what Bauman (2003) calls "liquid modernity," a mode feel in which romantic relationships are fleeting and disposable.

Academics such as Hatch and McCabe (2017) are critical that dating apps foster a "marketplace mentality," in which users assess potential partners on the basis of appearance and other value-signifiers, including education, income, and compatibility of lifestyle. This transactional outlook might also undermine long-term commitment by institutionalizing the practice of constantly evaluating and swapping out partners. Scholars like [52] also argues that platform infrastructures revolve around the maximization of engagement and monetization which facilitates the capturing of users in repeating search and comparison cycles rather than stable relational birth. However, there are warnings from other critics of the analysis that it is too deterministic and that users are active rather than passive in negotiating – and resisting- platform logics through communicative intentionality and relational depth-building.

The fundamental tension in this literature is whether or not the commodification of intimacy inevitably undermines emotional authenticity, or whether new forms of digital intimacy are able to develop within packaged market arrangements. This article advances the debate by suggesting that commodification is not simply a process of emotional decline, but one in which intimacy is rearticulated in a space of hybridity in

which market logics, algorithmic management, and human emotions meet in multi-layered and at times paradoxical configurations.

6. Gender and Power Relations in Online Dating

Gender and power dynamics in online dating constitute the politico-institutional nature of gendered online dating recipients, and the (inter)subjective experience of power, in which social, emotional, and algorithmic power converge within and between individuals of various genders in digitally mediated romantic situations. Gender, here, is conceptualized not simply as biological differentiation but as a matrix of social norms and expectations, roles and identities, which influence behaviour and interaction. Scholars like [53] describe gender as being performed and in the case of online dating, gender performance is hyper-visualized in profiles, through users' photos and descriptions, and through ranked desirability determined by algorithms. Power in Foucauldian terms (1977) is exercised not only by overt repression, but also by systems of normalization and surveillance. Power is encoded into the architecture of online dating, its algorithms and its user interaction mechanics in ways that determine who gets to be seen, who is prioritized and who is marginalized within it.

The sexual exploitation and violence undertones Women face while using online dating websites are the impacts of them being overexposed to harassment, objectification, and safety threats, all of which are the reflections of patriarchal norms that are mirrored in these virtual spaces. In the language of [10], technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a systemic form of offline misogyny transposed into digital environments, with anonymity and diminished accountability intensifying the harm. [43] empirical research shows that women in online dating platforms are more likely to be the recipient of unsolicited explicit messages, sexual harassment as well as more persistent unwanted attention than their male counterparts. Authors such as [27] maintain that these are not random occurrences but are structurally integrated in platform architecture that value engagement over user safety. However, her findings are consistent with a host of other research showing that women are also calculating in the way they use digital self-presentation to mitigate risk, to make themselves visible but not too visible -- they're doing something that [38] and [6] call "networked privacy management." This tandem of "being seen" but also "being vulnerable" captures the paradoxically gendered logic of empowerment and exposure within digital intimacy [39].

The online dating experiences of men are subject to parallel but no less powerful structural constraints, not least those of class and economic resources, physical attractiveness and social performance. Hegemonic masculinity constitutes normative masculine success, dominance and desirability (Connell 1995), which is enacted in digital dating spaces through profile hierarchies and user selection options and strategies. Research shows that men tend to have lower match rates on swipe-based systems, culminating in what some scholars call "asymmetrical desirability economies" [28]. This dynamic place pressure on men to improve their economic signals, their physical appearance, and their conversational performance, if they want to remain competitive in these algorithmically structured markets of attention. Scholars like [16] suggest that these contextual factors contribute to heightened anxiety and competitive relational interactions, which leads male users to frequently perceive dating platforms as "high-stakes" markets for status and visibility. Nevertheless, critical analyses warn against conflating male oppression with systemic gender oppression, arguing that social power differentials still significantly render women as 'worse-off 'in terms of safety, harassment, and bodily autonomy.

Algorithmic systems complicate gender relations even further by automating biases and norms of culture/historic within decision-making processes. They are trained on behavioral data that perpetuates existing social inequalities: algorithms are not neutral. As [40] points out, search and recommendation algorithms are also known to maintain racialized and gendered hierarchies of desirability by prioritizing dominant aesthetic and cultural norms. In online dating sites, this results in a form of "unequal visibility," as some racial and ethnic communities find themselves at the receiving end of fewer matches and lower rates of interaction notwithstanding similar levels of engagement. Research by [15] reveals that racial dating preferences are systemically organized and mirror more general societal hierarchies of privilege and exclusion. This algorithmic mediation of attraction also prompts critical questions about the ways in which notions of "desirability" are constructed—not simply determined by free choice but through pre-configured technical systems that filter, rank, and privilege users in manners that shape relational outcomes even before interaction takes place.

The convergence of gender, race, and algorithmic governance in this context exposes a more foundational structural condition of power in online dating that manifests through both human behavior and technological architecture. Platform ecosystems can be understood as "socio-technical infrastructures," where user agency is shaped by the extraction of data, the design of interfaces and the implementation of monetization strategies [52]. What these produces are what [54] terms "instrumentarian power," whereby systems of behavioral prediction shape not only the content of what users see, but how users see themselves, and others. It creates a relational context where social inequality can be both seen and unseen—felt in the body on one hand and practiced in the codification of algorithmic processes on the other.

There is a fundamental lacuna in combining lived gendered experience and computational governance in the literature. While offline gender inequality has been well theorized by

feminist theory, and algorithmic bias has been subject of investigation by computational studies, these and other fields have less fully combined the emotional, technological and structural facets related to digital intimacy in one conceptual tool-kit. This study fills this lacuna by contending that gender and power in online dating are best conceptualized as being co-produced across embodied interaction, platform design, and algorithmic mediation. In its pursued form, online dating not only mirrors gender inequality, but reshapes it into new modalities of visibility, desirability, and emotional risk that are at once intimately individual and structurally organized.

7. Online Dating and Globalization

Globalization of intimacy is a conceptual tool that denotes the expansion of individuals' capacity to establish romantic and emotional relationships with those in other countries, cultures, and regions of the world via digitally mediated platforms. It is symbolic of the more comprehensive sociological process of globalization, which [20] characterizes as the "compression of the world" in social relations, in which faraway places become connected to each other in ways that modify people's day to day. In online dating, globalization has taken the form of transnational romantic networks, mediated by such platforms as Tinder, Bumble and OkCupid, where users venture beyond borders that once acted as social or spatial borders. Appadurai (1996) argues that the global cultural flows – seen here as technological, ideological, and mediascapes – have led to the emergence of "scapes" of interactions which allow individuals to engage in relationships outside of their immediate social surroundings. Research conducted by [44] suggests that digital platforms have particularly high potential to encourage cross-border partner selection, especially among young, urban, educated, and digitally-savvy individuals. But as scholars such as [32] note, this globalization of intimacy is also deeply uneven, structured by global inequalities of mobility, wealth and digital access, and offering relational possibilities that are at once expanded and stratified.

Transnational marriages are intimate relationships created between the people of different nations and living in separate national spaces and are conducted through digital means of communication. These relationships have become more normalized within the global dating infrastructure where geographic distance is bridged by constant connectivity, video communication, and algorithmic matching platforms. As [11] illustrates, transnational intimacy is frequently influenced by uneven relations of social and economic power, particularly in scenarios that involve aspirations to migrate and gendered norms. In such instances digital platforms are not simply sites of romantic connection, but also infrastructures of mobility in which intimate relationships intersect and become intertwined with strategies for migration, visa regimes, and global labor inequalities. Scholars such as [41] suggest that transnational intimacy often reiterates larger global divisions of labor and emotion economies where care and desire are enmeshed with structural inequality. However, recent studies also underline that individuals are not passive in these dynamics and are actively engaged in renegotiating the same dynamics of power, implying that digital intimacies may foster hybrid forms of relational identity that transcend the national while also being rooted in unequal global structures.

Cultural exchange in online dating describes how people from different cultural origins communicate, mutual negotiate the meaning of themselves, their relationships and the emotional expression. This exchange is accomplished through digital communication technologies that enable ongoing interaction within and across linguistic, cultural and symbolic borders. Scholars like [25] proposes that globalization engenders "cultural interconnectedness," wherein meaning travels and is transformed across locales, spurring the production of hybrid identities and social practices. In online dating forums, culture jamming is evident in styles of communication, expectations for relationships, and varying norms regarding intimacy and gender roles. But, scholars of the likes of [48] resist the notion that globalization entails a homogenization of cultures and argues that complex patterns of adaptation, resistance and selective appropriation emerge. Globally, as digital romantic space, imagined (and racialized) identities are also nurtured and actively inform who is desirable and which global geographical notions of gender and race are most represented in global inequalities. The interplay between cultural hybridity and structural stereotyping continues to be an important element of theoretical contestation, especially in relation to how global intimacy is shaping up to be both enabling and constraining.

Within Africa, online dating is a burgeoning facet of digital social life, fueled by growing smartphone ownerships, availability of mobile internet services, and engagement of urban youth. Africa has seen a significant rise in mobile internet usage, especially among young individuals in urban areas, altering communication and social interaction patterns, according to the International Telecommunication Union [33]. Scholars like [12] have postulated that while digital technologies are indeed brought into Africa, they are not 'simply imported' but become localised and translated within cultural and social frames of understanding. In this way, online dating in African cities becomes a hybrid of global digital dating styles and local relationship culture, traditional norms of courtship enveloped within digital communication practices. However, impediments of digital access, gendered vulnerabilities, and socioeconomic disparities persist in influencing who can participate in and benefits from online dating sites. Trends in big data usage in cities such as Lagos, Nairobi, and Kampala show a sharp rise in mobile dating apps – most notably amongst educated youth populations they portray navigating changing norms of modernity, autonomy, and relational freedom.

The scholarly discussion of online dating and globalization is converging around a core dilemma: whether digital intimacy is a manifestation of democratizing processes that enables new relational possibilities, or whether it is a new terrain for the (re)articulation of global inequality within emotively

charged systems. Scholars like [9] argue that networked societies are more tightly connected than ever, but [52] and [54] underline that this connectivity is mediated by means of platform capitalism, where the harvesting of data and algorithmic governance inform visibility and opportunity. This article intervenes in these debates by arguing that a globalized intimacy should be seen as a multi layered process of emotional connection, technological infrastructure, and global inequality. Instead of generating homogenous experiences of romantic freedom, online dating produces stratified emotional geographies where intimacy is at once globalized and localized, expanding relational horizons while again positioning users within persistent social inequalities.

8. Ethical and Legal Concerns

The human rights of individuals in the context of these normative, regulatory and institutional frameworks are an object of protection in terms of their rights, dignity, autonomy and safety in digitally mediated romantic environments. It relates to issues such as should do, do not do, do not ask permission for, ask permission for with regard to privacy, consent, fairness and prevent harm are the problems of ethics, whereas concerns are issues of legal including rules you can enforce, you have to enforce and you want to enforce in relation to data protection, platform responsibility and user safety. The emergence of the "information society" has brought about new challenges in ethics as human interactions are more and more mediated by data infrastructures that conceal the boundaries between private life and commercial use in the view of [17]. On online dating platforms, this ethical conflict is particularly pronounced as users' most intimate personal information is constantly harvested, analyzed, and sold, sparking debates over the moral boundaries of surveillance capitalism.

Privacy and data security are among the most important ethical concerns in online dating. Privacy is the right of the person to control the access to their own information, such as location information, communication history, preferences, and patterns of behavior. Boy and Crawford (2012) report that big data infrastructures have become adept at converting personal data into products of analysis and commodities, all too often outside of the full comprehension of users or without their informed consent. In the domain of online dating, platforms gather extremely sensitive information on emotional preferences, sexual orientation and relational behaviour, thus exposing users to particularly high risks of data misuse. In [54] view, this harvesting of behavioural data lays the groundwork for "surveillance capitalism," a process through which human experience is rendered as predictive products for commercial gain. This raise pressing questions about the ethical validity of consent, when users as a rule accept long, often opaque, and hard-to-understand terms of service. The divide between formal consent and meaningful understanding continues to be a core ethical challenge in governing digital intimacy.

Privacy and data protection are among the most important ethical issues of online dating. Privacy is the individual's right to control the access to his or her personal information such as location, communication history, preferences, and behaviors. Big data systems regularly transform personal data into commodifiable and analyzable forms of information, often obscuring these processes from users and obscuring whether these systems hold data subject interests [7]. In an online dating context, platforms are in possession of extremely sensitive information that indicates emotional preferences, sexuality and relational dynamics, which means that users are more exposed to potential data abuses than they might be in other contexts. Scholars like [54] contends that such harvesting of behavioural data undergirds "surveillance capitalism" in which human experience is commodified as predictive data for commercial exploitation. This leads to a pressing question about the ethical validity of consent, when users are agreeing to terms of service that are often confusing, lengthy, and hard to understand. The difference between box ticking consent and meaningful consent continues to be a key ethical challenge for digital intimacy governance.

Consent in online dating is more than just legal consent; it also involves ongoing relational and informational autonomy as part of the digital interactions. Such as the case of made in that now) and have asked the (ATEQI) to privacy as "contextual integrity," which involves that flows of information need to be appropriate to the norms of a social context and not only be legally allowed. In the context of online dating services, though, information boundaries tend to become fuzzy as users' personal data is sold to, shared with, and analyzed by third parties. This leads to a consent that is fragmented, ever-shifting and subject to renegotiation rather than the two parties agreeing on a single once and for all term. Also, the advent of algorithmic matchmaking adds a second layer of consent intricacy, as users become the subjects of unseen mechanisms of ranking, filtering, and recommending that determine their access to potential partners in ways they do not explicitly know. Automated decision-making systems can generate structural inequality under the pretense of efficiency and personalization, thereby obscuring and, consequently, undermining the very notion of equitable social participation in processes from which people can only benefit if they have available to them autonomy and informed participation [14] making for complicated Ethics of existence.

Security of information and surveillance also pose further legal and ethical concerns in online dating markets [26]. Data security is a user protection which ensures the information from users are not accessed, stolen, or misused by any third party, and surveillance is a behavior to systematically track and monitor the users' online activities for commercial or institutional use. [36], current digital system is like "surveillance societies," where harvesting data, is as routine as baking bread and harvesting wheat and is often invisible. Sensitive user information has been exposed in security breaches of online dating sites, leading to potential identity theft, reputational damage and emotional distress. Simultaneously, ever behavioral

data tracking allows the platform to maximize engagement with predictive algorithms, reflecting and reinforcing [54] contention that surveillance is not a mere offshoot but an articulating economic principle. The balance of user protection and data commodification is still a matter of debate, especially in the area of weak regulatory regime and disintegrated framework of digital governance.

Algorithmic accountability is the duty of the platform provider in the delivery of the service to make its automated decision-making system visible, fair, and explicable. Algorithms employed by online dating services dictate who can be seen and matched with, and then billed as an opportunity to date, thereby influencing relational options in ways many users do not understand. Because of [42] they became "black boxes" whose purpose and working logic behind decisions were made invisible to the public and removed from the reach of regulatory help.[40] also argues that algorithmic processes can perpetuate racial, gender, and class-based preconceptions found in training data and patterns of use to maintain social inequalities while presenting itself as a neutral platform. Which brings up important questions of accountability for when biased romantic visibility and desirability outcomes are produced by algorithmic systems. There is certainly greater emphasis on ethical AI governance, but there are still a number of platforms that value engagement metrics and monetization over fairness and transparency.

Content moderation and platform accountability is yet another key ethical boundary in online dating. The review named content moderation as the processes by which platforms examine, filter, and/or take action on user-generated content to mitigate harm, such as harassment, fake profiles and abusive communications. To quote [23] moderation is a "technical practice that is also a political one" influencing what speech is permissible and which voices get heard or silenced. In the world of online dating, poor moderation systems can lead to abuse going unchecked and often targets women and marginalized groups. Academics including [10] and [27] contend that technology-facilitated abuse necessitates more robust regulation that obligates platforms to implement proactive safety safeguards as opposed to reactive reporting mechanisms. Nevertheless, there continues to be tension between freedom of expression, commercial incentives and user protection, leading to a regulatory no-man's land where responsibility is frequently ill-defined, and enforcement patchy.

There is an important omission in the literature in terms of the convergence of legal issues, algorithmic governance, and user experience that hinders the development of a holistic analysis of online dating practices. Although there have been studies from the legal perspective, dealing with issues of regulation and compliance, and from the sociological perspective, evaluating the lived experience, there are less frameworks that encompass these elements in the context of platform capitalism. This article contributes to that gap by making the case that ethical and legal issues in online dating are structurally situated within data-intensive infrastructures that make intimacy both possible and profitable. The core tension remains unresolved: can regulation effectively protect users of platform-based intimacy without dramatically restructuring its economic model?

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has found that online dating is a radical reconfiguration of modern sociality and the production, regulation, and experience of intimacy is digitally mediated. Taking its cue from varied theoretical perspectives across disciplines, it posits that digital intimacy is not simply a technological development but a sociological phenomenon influenced by globalization, algorithmic governance, and platform capitalism. Although online dating affirms what Western culture has been telling its girls for the last half-century — that they should always be looking for new and better ways to connect socially, cross-culturally, and relationally — it also complicates that message with a whole lot of risk: risk of being deceived, harassed, commodified, and mentally stressed. The analysis further demonstrates that such dynamics appear to be profoundly structured by inequalities of power, namely gendered and racialized relations and algorithmic biases structuring visibility, desirability and relational outcomes. Given these results, it is advisable for policymakers to enhance the regulatory regimes on data protection, algorithmic transparency, and platform accountability to protect user rights and privacy. Online dating platforms need to incorporate a more holistic approach to ethical design including stronger identity verification mechanisms, better content moderation, and safety features that prioritize users. There is also a call for digital literacy initiatives that foster critical understanding of online risks, consent processes, and data protection. Future research should further explore culture, technology, and intimacy through mixed-method and big data approaches to better understand how digital platforms are continuously reshaping human relations in diverse global contexts.

Abbreviations

LGBTQ	L – Lesbian, G – Gay, B – Bisexual, T – Transgender, Q – Queer (or sometimes Questioning)

Author Contributions

Aaron Ayeta Mulyanyuma: Conceptualization, Supervision, writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Justus Twesigye: Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft

Muwereza Nathan: Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft

Agaba Halidu: Investigation, writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Diana Munyao Mutuku: Conceptualization, Methodology

Data Availability Statement

The study is based on the secondary data that constitutes the main source of information.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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