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## Chasing Cinderella: love and affection in the age of the mobile device industry

**ABSTRACT.** The extensive use of mobile phones is today a constant part of our daily routines. This social habit had affected also the sphere of emotion, sexuality and the ways people show affection or discontent towards the others. This paper aims at the main characteristics of the relatively new phenomenon of online dating and dating applications in the context of the mobile industry's rise in contemporary economies. The process of a growing number of devices and applications sold worldwide cannot be disregarded in a sociological sense as it clearly affects other areas of public and private lives of individuals. The issue of online security is here also brought into attention. The main thesis of this paper is however based on the notion of the mobile industry as a main factor in changing the technological side of social relations in the today's reality, but on the other hand a certain historical evidence is being highlighted that shows a continuity on a more personal level of the way people deal with love in general.

**KEYWORDS:** Tinder, mobile industry, mobile phone, dating dating applications, apps, technology

In an archetypal romantic fairy tale's narrative we usually find a leading plot, or a simplistic and linear story structure in which a male and female protagonists, despite numerous obstacles, finally find their way to into a romantic relationship and fall in love. This very *leitmotiv* is being played by many authors in various time periods and belongs strictly to the historically shaped canon of Western literary tradition in most of its genres. Starting with the antique Greek plays of Euripides, through medieval romances sung by numerous minstrels on Europe's most notable royal courts and ending with the uber romanticism of gothic novels by Mary Shelley and Walter Scott—the picturesque of emotional engagement between two individuals is vastly relying on a feeling of a deep and truly partnership of souls. Romantic expectations towards this affection are usually common not just in love stories *per se*, but also in dramas, comedies etc. In fact the comedic potential of romantic love is being well put into a working praxis in William Shakespeare's most known dramas like *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You like It* or *A Midsum-*

*mer Night's Dream*. These selected literary texts present the affection occurring between the dramatic characters as a specific *force majorie* in terms of creating a comedic plot leading to an inevitable happy ending. Thus romantic love might be regarded in this context as humorous adventure with no other goal to achieve except true love itself. With time romanticism became not just a cultural habit but also a compulsory element of the paradigmatic emotional discourse, especially when speaking of marriage or other forms of socially accepted partnership. No other factors leading to a marital status of an individual are still so highly appreciated today as a rosy story how a couple met and fell in love at first sight.

The loving gaze of a partner is just a small part of a broader romantic picture. It is being painted with colors like commitment, sacrifice and understanding the other person's needs. Just as any other picture it is therefore exaggerated, full of contrast and could be regarded in many ways as hyperbolic. The necessity of "seeing" emotions of the other is something what has a profound impact on how the relationship will develop or come to an end in a spectacular catastrophe because of the lack of it. The visual context of this issue is becoming even more significant when we move onto the field of popular culture. The representations of romanticism in film, web content or popular visual arts range from banality of the *Twilight* saga to complex metanarratives of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. The diner conversation between "Pumpkin" and "Honey Bunny" in the opening sequence of the movie might serve here as a good example of a tragicomic aspect of affection. Love is being presented in it at the same time as a main driving force and a series of gags caused by the total commitment the two characters present. The cinematic screen is transforming the feeling into a two way situation, or a structural dichotomy of signs so to speak. We either participate in the lover's affair by accepting their controversial actions or perceive them as rogue antiheroes along with other popcultural impersonations of greater or lesser evil. The choices made by viewers in this situation are ambiguous in their nature. We love to hate these two and hate to love them as the pair robs the restaurant's guests of their possessions. This semiotic ambiguity seems to be similar to the one found in the main characters in *Bonny and Clyde* or towards Leon and Mathilda in *Leon the Professional*. The emotional dichotomy seems to be a not just a signifier for the Tarantino's movie itself but with success might be regarded as a constant element of the whole contemporary cultural landscape.

As screens got smaller and movies are no longer solely watched in theatres the technological advancement allowed us to get more mobile. The mobile industry became in the last 15 years one of the fastest growing segments in the global economy. According to the *Business Insider* for example just the market for mobile phones alone will grow constantly, reaching 3,5 billion devices sold until 2020 (Business Insider, 2016). This trend is referring not just to the number of sold cell phones, but also to the number of new users of mobile technology worldwide. It is being forecasted that in the year 2017 the global number of cell phone users will reach over 4,7 billion people (Statista, 2016). It is also worth noting that most of this new users will come from so called developing countries like India and China which has one of the fastest growing markets for technology in general. At this point we might make a statement that the proliferation of mobile devices in those countries is a sign of a economic, social and cultural change in a structural sense. The former Third World is chasing the West in this matter with a increasing speed and in some aspects it has already surpassed it by at least an arm length. An exemplification of this trend might be the fact that Chinese internet users numbers are already higher than in the United States as for 2014, followed closely by India (Internet Live Stats, 2016). As Fredric Jameson puts it, connecting the issue of technological improvement with cultural transition following the first one is the most common ways to understand modernization (Jameson, 2002). By doing so we are theoretically able to grasp the key factors of the process by putting side by side these two areas of human agency. Technology and culture become entangled in a holistic global process of modernization which, in a sense of technological determinism, inevitably leads to homogenization of culture itself. We seem to use today very much the same brand cell phones, computers and other IT inventions produced and distributed within a relatively small world of industrial corporations and retail chains that had grown to gargantuan proportions and still keep on expanding in new markets.

Thus the mobile revolution we are witnessing since at least a decade is a social fact and influences highly contemporary arts of communication. Recalling Marshall McLuhan, we might say with a large dose of certainty that the next leap in communication will happen through the means of handheld devices creating a complex structure of interconnected cells of a ephemerid global mobile body. The demise of print media, dropping book sales and the fight for sheer survival among today's book authors and many publishing houses forces them to go online.

Blogs, tweets and web data feeds are replacing memoirs, letters and newspapers. The virtual universe is expanding and taking one after another every area of former human physical existence and agency. New fields arise and the old ones are being emphasized and transformed in order to obey the consumer logic. As Jean Baudrillard stresses out contemporary culture is always focused upon what appears to be bigger, better and faster than the previously consumed good (Baudrillard, 1998). This creates an endless chain of consumption that drives itself and constantly gains momentum. It's almost like a ride on an American highway with the imperative of speed and consumption instead of the physical road and destination. However, Baudrillard's notion of consumer culture serves here a higher purpose, i.e. his own project of critical analysis of the American culture based on radical consumerism and the idea of speed. In his book *America* the French sociologist makes a clear statement on this matter by saying that: "speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it" (Baudrillard, 1999, p. 6). Thus all consumer goods are being forced to obey this logic in order to be placed and made highly visible in an already maximized hyper-reality. In this context it's no wonder that love and sex quickly became in focus of the mobile industry. Larger than life bodies of supermodels, romances of celebrities and wannabe movie stars are displayed in the media through screens, billboards and glossy covers of lifestyle magazines. The devices we use are mostly equipped now with large touch screens allowing us to swipe through endless streams of data, facebook status updates, instagram photos or short twitter messages. The information highway is however forcing us to meet the requirements of speed and necessity of going global instead of staying put and grow roots in what was once local.

In this light the former picture of romantic life is being transferred into a speed dating contest. Having just a eye blink to assess other person's qualities and physical attractiveness is in consequence a dromology of love (to quote Paulo Virilio's notion) and squeezed into few minutes of small talk. This exaggerated view of contemporary amorous relations is reflected in the praxis of the mobile world as well the mobile industry. New dating applications are making their rounds in recent years and their popularity is constantly growing. Their key use feature is focused on fast evaluation of other people on the basis of their physical

appearance and short notes each user usually writes to describe him- or herself. Some of these applications are pointing out those people in their database who match in a lesser or larger extent either our search criteria or our This leads to the effect in which the smart phone becomes a modern day love counselor—a digital Cyrano de Bergerac for the swiping generation so to say. The bound between man and machine is in this example a close and personal connection based on data links and wifi spot accessibility. Mobile dating is creating instantly new opportunities to meet people in real life, however most of these relationships seem to be still born, prosper and finally fade away mostly online. This might clearly change in the near future. As an evidence we might recall the data gathered in the United States between 2005 and 2012 showing that one third of American marriages start as an online relationship (USA Today, 2016). According to the sociologist Michael Rosenfeld, what is remarkable in this phenomenon is the fact that online marriages are more likely to last longer than those of couple who had met in a more traditional way. Certainly marriage isn't a compulsory outcome of the relationships started in the virtual universe but we might take this socially accepted point of reference into account for further considerations.

Nevertheless, the new interconnectivity through mobile devices replaces often traditional arts of communication and not just in the context of the dating applications. We depend today without any doubt on information technology and data circulation not just in our individual lives but merely in the very basic structure of the social, political, economic and cultural reality. The information society built on this structure is becoming increasingly determined by the flow of data as it is fundamental for its sheer survival as a global network of individuals, groups and institutions. Hacking, electric black outs and cyber criminality are being presented today as a serious threat to global and national security and to a large extent it is true. Manuel Castell's remarks on the link between the information society and the welfare state lead us to the notion of innovation and progress. Technological modernization is an obvious sign of dynamics in both areas, but nowadays this technical leap is treated as a constant and necessary part of our every day reality. Furthermore technological advancement is a key factor of economic growth in most western societies. Technological determinism, as put by Neil Postman and Marshal McLuhan before, is multiplied through the number of devices we carry, sometimes more than one at a time. Increasing sales of

mobile phones, tablets, smart watches and other devices make a large part of the current global economic growth and national industries producing those devices compete against each other in a fierce fight over patent rights, new customers and new emerging markets, just like the Korean Samsung and American Apple companies do today. Therefore it is not a surprise that the dynamics of the global mobile market and industry are being reflected in the part of the complex focused on delivering love, simulacra of romanticism and casual sex.

To the most trending dating applications today we have to include "Tinder". The company behind this application was founded in 1995 in New York. Since then its *modus operandi* in business was based mostly on acquisitions of other companies, creating start-ups and introduction of new media platforms (for example new television broadcasting services). In 2012 Tinder was launched by the company as the first ever swiping application, in which users made their matches through swiping movement on the touch screen—left for no and right for yes if they wanted to increase their chances for a real meeting or at least a conversation with the other. The revolutionary aspect of this app is considered to be the swiping mode of the user's interface. Many other applications copied this idea in order to allow users to choose the content they want to see by a slight movement of the finger left or right. Swiping apps are today becoming more and more popular thanks to their simplicity of making decisions. Tinder users make their decisions on the basis of pictures posted by other people and a brief description. The photo content of user's profiles is linked also to their Facebook pages, including potential mutual interested or friends shared online. Basically the choice for swiping right is being made on physical attractiveness and the virtual persona created through one's pictures and minimal self-description. This very feature of Tinder had led also to its critique as a shallow and one dimensional way of judging other people. As in 2015 the world was shocked by the idea presented by two American entrepreneurs to create a much more direct application called "Peep!" of actually evaluating people, Tinder's focus on the importance of the first look seems to be outdated (The Washington Post, 2016). What is significant however is the fact that Tinder was the first of such applications and the vast scale of the whole enterprise.

By the year 2015 Tinder claimed having a number of estimated 50 million active users worldwide, 10 million active daily users, 9 billion matches being made and 1,4 billion swipes in general being made so far

(DMR, 2016b). Most users of Tinder are in the age between 25–34 (with a second largest group between 18–24), over a half of is single, where users already in relationship make 12% overall. Every second 16000 swipes and 300 matches are being made. The overwhelming scale of the enterprise is being also reflected in the application's popularity as a cultural phenomenon. Popular language quickly adopted the term "Tinder dates" to describe hookups based on brief online encounters and usually leading to a casual sexual adventure. Tinder itself and similar dating applications became a cultural point of reference in numerous talk shows (Conan O'Brien for example), television and other media.

What we witness today is a real turning point in the dating game through the massive invasion of mobile technology and new software into the sphere reserved until recently for more traditional and non-digital means and regulated by more conservative social norms. The shift in this matter is made by technology in the first place, but also by a deep transition in global cultural patterns of understanding affection through the smart phone screens and instant accessibility to everyone's online profile and information. Other factors for a growing interest in online dating might be related to the crisis of certain values perceived in the past as dominant. Thus the crisis of masculinity as described by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Baudrillard on one hand or the discontent with the formal institution of marriage (as well other formalized areas of life) on the other might serve here as an example of such *signum temporis*. Tinder's idea of minimize the necessary and basic content to what is really essential is simultaneously a step towards rejecting all the formalities and social rituals connected to past ways of meeting people, carefully constructing emotional engagement and eventually falling in love. In fact love is not the key point in online dating. What seems to be in the center of this phenomenon is creating the possibility of a match with someone we find attractive, who has similar interests or we expect to like.

What cannot be neglected however are the expectations for a touch of romanticism in the endeavor. The criticism expressed towards Tinder is basically based on the argument that its killing the romantic aspect of male/female relationships by degrading them into quick sexual satisfaction without keeping the whole romantic entourage found in popular culture. The decline of romanticism through the rise of dating apps is not just related to the crisis of romantic love itself but rather linked to a broader cultural turn through new media, especially social sites. The

fundamental rule of most of these web sites and applications is the act building up and maintaining a social profile of ourselves. The carefully chosen elements of our own identity are being presented online in display for others to witness. The constructed virtual self is for many people as real as the physical world around them. The importance and the social impact of the digital *la bella figura* overcasts sometimes direct interaction, the intimacy of face to face conversation and the human touch of a date. However the mobile industry has also filled this gap with an application based on crossing our daily paths with strangers. The location tracking based app called "Happn" is expanding immensely in recent time with 10 million users as for 2015 (DMR, 2016a). It is regarded as a more romantic and paradoxically more "real" as Tinder. It's a well made and marketed alternative to Tinder, nevertheless it still remains a digital product which has to sell and attract new customers.

As Happn capitalizes on the vision of regaining the long lost romanticism in the most peculiar way, on the other end of the phenomenon we find applications deliberately stripped of the whole romantic aspect and focus just on pure sexual encounters. Recent hacking scandal in relation to the Ashley Madison affair, in consequence of which large quantities of personal user data leaked (and some of these users were also blackmailed), revealed a much broader issue. The lack of privacy control and the vulnerability of digital databases is an important and current problem not only in this case, but also in regards to all our cyber activities in general. Sex oriented mobile applications, like "Mixxxer" or "3ender" for example, promise privacy and safety in that context. Both of them advertise as online places for like minded individuals who share a liberal attitude towards sex and may safely interact with each other. The first one is focused on finding the right person with similar sexual preferences mostly for one night stands, the other on finding the right person for a *ménage a trois*. Some certainly may find these applications as morally doubtful, but human sexuality has historically always been categorized through moral standards set by one or another group of influence. It is worth noting that the inventor of 3ender reflects upon his invention as a spontaneous step in the direction of legitimization of the mentioned preference. The social determinism towards open expression of sexual preferences is however more visible in the context of sexual minorities. The influence of dating applications might be also seen as a factor for emancipation of minority groups. It cannot be surprising that also the LGBTQ groups are being offered a variety of mobile applications, like

“Grindr” or “Her” for example, seen often as a technology liberating from small town social pressure, logistic hustle in arranging meetings and minimizing the fear of rejection and stigmatization.

As we speak today of the rising role of dating applications and their influence on arranging our emotional and sexual lives a question might arise—is this kind of interaction really something entirely new to our collective experience? It is striking that the “Lonely Hearts” advertisements posted already in the 18th century in the first newspapers had a similar principle but were placed in a different medium. Short descriptions of one’s personal qualities, connection within the establishment and wealth displayed to the public view had certainly much of today’s social profiles not just on dating sites but also Facebook or Instagram. The detachment of the virtual self from reality and the imperative of being online is closely linked in this matter to the tissue of culture and its structures. Thus the argument of Tinder’s instrumentalization of love, affection and killing of romanticism seems to be invalid in the light of historical evidence. What Tinder and similar inventions had however successfully done is to market a long existing niche; or more of a part of human condition which not necessary finds imagined and constructed romanticism obligatory for male/female relationships. Dating applications are here regarded as a time saver in choosing the person we find simply attractive enough without the need to dive into specific situations which might lead to a rejection. However, we might on the other hand highlight this very cultural turn in acceptance of mobile dating in the area of social meanings, roles, aesthetics or practices with the emphasis of new technology. The mobile revolution in hand held devices is therefore a phenomenon which affects social behavior today more than ever.

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