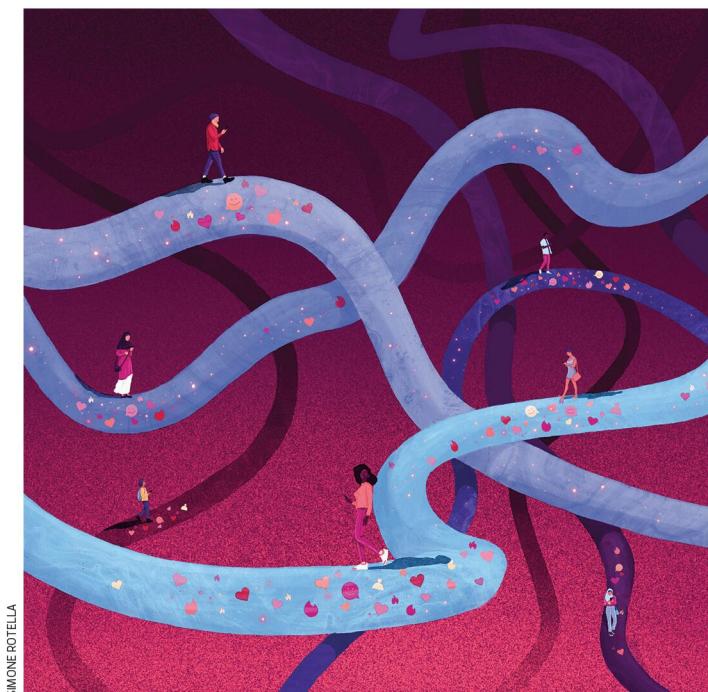Comment

Love in the time of AI

Dating apps have warped how we view romantic connections. Adding artificial intelligence could make things worse, argues **Luke Brunning**

FROM lawsuits to fumbled advertising campaigns, are we falling out of love with online dating? Recent Ofcom data showed a decline in UK users, and Gen Z seems to increasingly hanker after in-person romantic spontaneity. More broadly, the rise of online dating has been accompanied by growing social isolation and loneliness, as well as polarisation of attitudes between younger men and women on topics like the value of feminism or ideals of healthy masculinity.

To understand these changes, we need to recognise that dating apps have transformed how we connect in two ways: they make our search for intimacy radically private, and they widen our pool of compatible dates. The ability to interact with many people, free from scrutiny, makes the search for intimacy more calculating.

As dating apps have become less stigmatised, companies have gamified their platforms, making them instantly gratifying with "likes", "pings" and the sense romance could spark at any time. This keeps us on the apps and enables our attention to be a source of revenue. But gamified environments can become alienating as we hanker for new matches rather than deepening our existing relationships.

The desire for an advantage in the game of love leads many to purchase expensive tiered memberships. Yet most dating apps are frustratingly opaque about their algorithms and

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pricing. Is it really the case that paying £44.99 for a month's membership to Hinge means we will "go on 3x as many dates"? Where does that figure come from?

Worryingly, the premise that you get what you pay for in online dating may contribute to expressions of male entitlement to female attention, which are often seen on dating apps, as money is spent but dates fail to materialise.

It's easy to think we would be better off without dating apps. But the industry remains buoyant. It thinks the answers to issues like loneliness lie in more tech, not less, with hopes that generative

AI will help. This includes Match Group, owner of Hinge, Tinder and other dating platforms, suggesting AI will help "daters curate their photos and bios to better showcase who they are".

As someone who co-runs an academic network exploring the ethical impact of online dating, this approach seems mistaken. Dating apps arguably have a social role in facilitating genuine intimacy, but they must recognise their contribution to the loneliness crisis, address the harmful sides of privacy, commercial opacity and gamification, and be wary

of creating new hazards.

One such hazard lies in neglecting the risks posed by AI, especially for vulnerable young people. Widespread use of AI to write dating bios and prompt conversations may turn apps into deeply inauthentic spaces where manipulation is easier than ever, worsening existing social biases, and leading to harmful expectations about body image.

If dating apps were less gamified, or we were nudged to take breaks, we would be better able to spend our attention on deepening our connections, not increasing matches. Apps should also be designed beyond the yes/no binary of swiping left or right, providing ways for the unsure or curious to connect. Unexpected connections may stem from more dynamic and explorable online spaces that give us more creative ways to express ourselves.

Dating app users pay too much to be lonely and frustrated. Before embracing generative AI, dating apps must solve the problems they created by innovating to connect us with more transparency and agency. They may be unwilling to do so, since their current design means the more we swipe, the more they earn, but if they don't, they are unlikely to survive rising apathy towards online dating. ∎

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