

# Exploring the concept of power in the domain of (mental) health in the age of digital dating

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Sure, Technology has made our lives easier in almost every aspect; access to resources for gaining knowledge, getting a taxi booked in seconds or even finding “the one” to spend the rest of your life with. But at what cost?

Modern day dating, majorly initiated out by judging a potential partner behind one’s digital screen based on an inadequate textual description of themselves and a carefully selected, over-filtered catalogue of images, is on the rise<sup>1</sup> and increasing the links in the network society which Castelle<sup>2 3 4</sup> describes as “weak ties”. Applications like Grindr, Tinder, Bumble, etc. “fuel the idea of a disposable society where people can match, date once, and not give it much effort”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Tinder Hits \$3 Billion Valuation After Match Group Converts Options." 31 Aug. 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenbertoni/2017/08/31/tinder-hits-3-billion-valuation-after-match-group-converts-options/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Networks in Manuel Castells' theory of the network society." 16 Jul. 2015, [https://mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/65617/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_65617.pdf](https://mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/65617/1/MPRA_paper_65617.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "First Evidence That Online Dating Is Changing the Nature of Society ...." 10 Oct. 2017, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/609091/first-evidence-that-online-dating-is-changing-the-nature-of-society/>.

<sup>4</sup> "What is weak tie theory? - WhatIs.com - TechTarget." <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/weak-tie-theory>.

<sup>5</sup> "Are 'swipe left' dating apps bad for our mental health? - BBC News." 7 Sep. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45419105>.

Now that we've established what digital applications we are talking about and how they function, let's get into analysing this question which Sociology problematizes:

**- How the introduction of this new technology of digital dating applications shapes the existing network of power relations, particularly in the social institution of healthcare?**

In this digital world of dating which I feel is driven by aesthetics, individuals who are considered “good-looking” have the upper hand in dictating/amplifying the trends which further reshapes one's concept of self. Following Mead's theory of ‘Symbolic Interactionism’<sup>6</sup>, this can be understood by the notion of “generalised other”<sup>7</sup> (after all it's the digital double of the individual, not the individual itself) upsetting the ‘self’ of people who aren't as “good-looking” as others on the platform. Looking through with the lens of Assemblage<sup>8</sup> (how the data double and the human affect each other), this developed ‘self’, which I believe has characteristics made of low self-esteem (in trying to cope up with the rejections faced on such platform), can transform the mental health of the concerned individual. So, in a way, these “good-looking” people possess the power to transform the state of mental health of people who are not so “good-looking” and these people dictate what is supposed to be “healthy” in that society because those are the people who are more prone to be picked. This can be seen as an extension to the idea of how the advertisements of ‘Cult Fit’ involving the popular Bollywood actor, Hrithik Roshan, changes the perception of a healthy body which in turn changes the perception of self, as discussed in the class.

Notice that these shifts in the mental health of a person are not tagged as disruptive or not associated with anything negative. Durkheim defines “health” as a state of normalcy and “illness” as a state of pathology<sup>9</sup>. So, what is considered healthy, i.e. what is considered normal, changes from society to society, as discussed in the class.

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<sup>6</sup> "Mead, George Herbert | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." <https://www.iep.utm.edu/mead/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Mead, George Herbert | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." <https://www.iep.utm.edu/mead/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Deleuze and Guattari." 10 Apr. 2006, <https://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/deleuzeandguattari.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> "Émile Durkheim: Social Order and Public Health - Springer Link." [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137355621\\_5](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137355621_5).

This power is hierarchical in nature according to me, contrary to the nature of power in the traditional days of dating- which was more pervasive and 'flat' (i.e. everyone experiences and practice it in the same way). I certainly see the power turning into a 'Symbolic Power' <sup>10</sup> over a long period of time with the current fabric of society, if it already hasn't.

The point I'm trying to make is captured by Daniel from Kent who believes the apps can lead to "body confidence problems because you are continually aware of your competition" <sup>11</sup>. Although behavioural and psychological, Professor Trent Petrie's remark fits as well: "With a focus on appearance and social comparisons, individuals can become overly sensitised to how they look and appear to others and ultimately begin to believe that they fall short of what is expected of them in terms of appearance and attractiveness. We would expect them to report higher levels of distress, such as sadness and depression, and feel more pressures to be attractive and thin" <sup>12</sup>.

A causal relationship between the platform (the application itself) and the participants is avoided (as practised in Sociology) and the relationship is therefore seen forming a recursive loop.

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<sup>10</sup> "Symbolic Power - P. Bourdieu, 1979 - SAGE Journals."

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0308275X7900401307>.

<sup>11</sup> "Are 'swipe left' dating apps bad for our mental health? - BBC News." 7 Sep. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45419105>.

<sup>12</sup> "Are 'swipe left' dating apps bad for our mental health? - BBC News." 7 Sep. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45419105>.